

The Karen people: culture, faith and history



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Cover photo: A Karen Buddhist monk and two nuns who fled persecution by Burmese Army soldiers. *Courtesy Karen Human Rights Group*

Introduction

Since arriving in Australia as a refugee three years ago I have had many people ask me questions about Karen people and Karen culture.

As I am a Buddhist monk, I am often asked questions about Karen Buddhist culture.

This book answers many questions about Karen culture.

This book recognises that the Karen people are very diverse. Among the Karen people there are different languages, different cultures, different religions, and different political groups. No one can claim to speak on behalf of all Karen people, or represent all Karen people.

This small book has a lot of useful information about Karen people and culture. I would recommend you to read this book, but also try to meet many different Karen people and learn more about our people and culture.

May all beings be happy and peaceful!

Venerable Ashin Moonieinda
Abbott
Karen Buddhist Monastery Bendigo



About this book

The purpose of this book is to provide basic information about the Karen people – who they are, where they live, their history, culture and faiths.

This book is primarily written for people in Australia and other western countries who are working with Karen refugees. Often where the book refers to Karen refugees starting new lives in Australia, the issue will be the same in other western countries.

The book may also be useful for other people working with Karen people in Thailand or Burma.

The focus of this book is Karen culture. When people think about culture, they often think about the visible aspects of “traditional culture”. The visible aspects of traditional Karen culture are very important to Karen people and this book briefly discusses them. However, it is important to understand that culture includes language, values, social rules, hierarchies, belief systems, and ways of seeing the world. When groups of people share all of these it gives them a sense of identity and interconnectedness.

Culture is constantly changing. One hundred and fifty years ago, Christianity and music videos were not a part of Karen culture. Now Christianity is a vital aspect of their culture for Karen Christians, and Karen people around the world watch traditional Karen singing and dancing on DVDs.

It is also important to remember that descriptions of culture apply to peoples, not to individuals. Individual Karen people may or may not observe Karen cultural rules, may or may not display outward signs of Karen culture, and may or may not share the beliefs and worldview of other Karen.

Finally, remember that Karen culture is very diverse and this book cannot cover every aspect or every Karen group. Readers should see this book as a starting point for learning more about the Karen people.

The Karen people – quick facts

- ❖ The Karen people are an ethnic group living in South-East Asia with their own distinct languages and culture
- ❖ The Karen people are very diverse, with different ethnic and language sub-groups
- ❖ Most Karen people practise Buddhism and Animism (spirit worship) but about 15% are Christian¹
- ❖ There are between six and seven million Karen people living in Burma, and about 300,000 “Thai-Karen” living in Thailand
- ❖ More than 140,000 Burmese Karen refugees have fled to Thailand to escape war and human rights abuses in Thailand
- ❖ The Karen people in Burma have been fighting a sixty-year civil war against the Burmese military regime for autonomy and cultural rights
- ❖ Between 2005 and 2009 fifty thousand refugees from Thailand, most of them Karen, were resettled in third countries including America, Canada and Australia. Fifteen thousand more refugees will be resettled in 2010.

Burma or Myanmar? Karen or Kayin?

In 1988 the Burmese military regime changed the name of country from Burma to Myanmar Nain-Ngan. Many other names of places and ethnic groups were changed.

Most democratic opposition groups have rejected the name change, and this book uses the older naming conventions.

Karen culture – do's and don't's

- ❖ Do smile a lot
- ❖ Don't lose your temper
- ❖ Do take your shoes off before going inside a Karen home, even if you are told it is okay to leave your shoes on, or people in the home are wearing shoes. (Some Karen have separate "house shoes" they only wear inside)
- ❖ When talking with Karen who do not speak English well, speak clearly and slowly, and check that information is understood. Someone who smiles, nods and just says "Yes" may not understand what you are talking about but be too polite to say so.
- ❖ Do shake hands. Don't hug or kiss a Karen, unless they are a baby.
- ❖ Do learn to speak at least some Karen phrases. Karen is an easy language to learn
- ❖ Do not go into the bedroom or kitchen of a Karen home unless you are specifically invited
- ❖ Karen are strong, resilient people who have survived life in war zones and refugee camps. While some Karen may struggle to learn English or adjust to life in a Western country, this does not mean they should be treated like children.

Who are the Karen people?

The Karen people are an ethnic group living in South East-Asia.

The Karen people are ethnically and linguistically diverse. Within the Karen there are different sub-groups with different languages, customs and religions.

The Karen are unique in that it is not necessary to have Karen parents to be Karen. Many Karen say that to be Karen a person must identify as Karen; know Karen culture and customs; and speak a Karen language.

Many people whose parents come from other ethnic groups but who have grown up in Karen villages chose to identify as Karen, and are regarded as being Karen by their communities. An example is a refugee who said, “My mother is ethnic Shan, my father is ethnic Burman, I was born in a Karen village and I am Karen.”

Karen people like to describe themselves as honest, hard working, friendly and hospitable. They admit however that not all Karen fit this ideal model. Karens who grow up in Burmese or Thai cities may not speak a Karen language, and culturally may be closer to Burmese or Thai people than to other Karens.

However the friendship and hospitality of Karen people is famous, and people who make friends with the Karen often find they have friends for life.

How many Karen people are there?

No one really knows how many Karen people there are. There has never been an accurate census in Burma. When Burma was a British colony only Christian and Animist Karen were recorded as Karen: Buddhist Karens were recorded as being ethnic Burmans.

More recent estimates of the size of the Karen are distorted by politics. In 1997 Burmese Army General Shwe Maung walked on a Karen flag and announced that “in twenty years you will only be able to find Karen people in a museum”. The Burmese military regime claims there are less than a million Karen people, but this is clearly politically motivated and a gross underestimate.

Some Karen leaders claim that there are twenty million Karen people in Burma – or about forty per cent of the population. This is also obviously politically motivated and a gross overestimate.

More realistic estimates are that there are between six and seven million Karen people in Burma².

There are about 300,000 “Thai-Karen” people living in Thailand. There are probably even more Karen living in Thailand as illegal migrants, but it is impossible to know how many.

Where do the Karen people live?

Most Karen people in Burma live in Karen State and Tenasserim (Mergui-Tavoy) Division in eastern Burma. There are also large Karen populations in the Irrawaddy Delta and Pegu Division in central Burma.

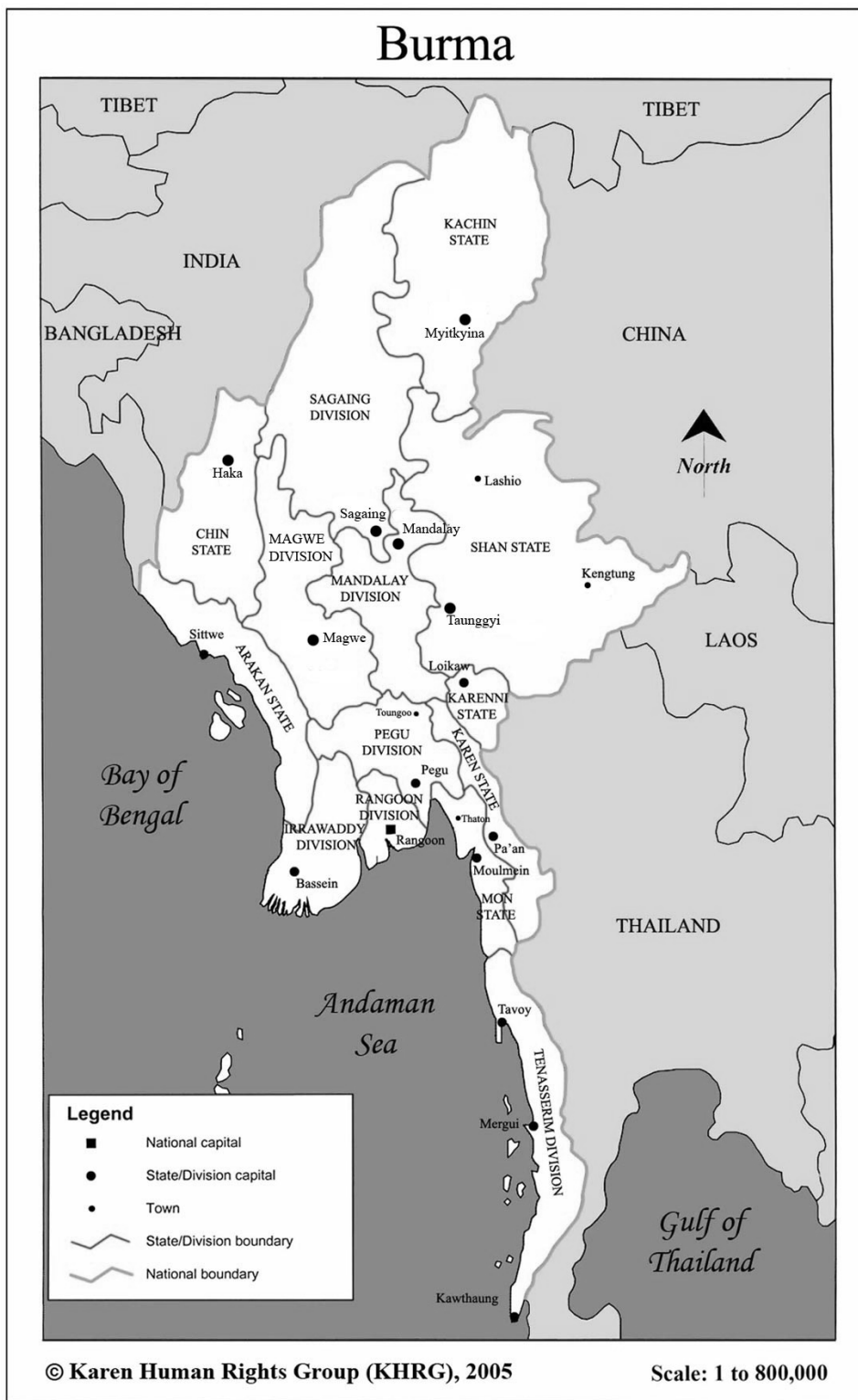
There are small Karen communities in Shan State and other areas in Burma.

There are more than a quarter of a million “Thai-Karen” living in western Thailand. These are Karen whose ancestral villages are in Thailand, and who have legal status there. Not all Thai-Karen are Thai citizens. Some hold “white cards” which allow them to remain in Thailand but give them the status of second-class citizens.

There are also 140,000 Burmese refugees in Thailand registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Most of these refugees are Karen.

A much larger number of Karen live in Thailand as migrant workers, most of them illegally.

Since 2005 more than 50,000 Karen refugees have been resettled in Western countries – most going to America, with smaller numbers going to Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and some European countries³.



A very brief history of the Karen people

It is believed that the Mon and Karen were the first groups to settle in Burma more than two thousand years ago. While the Mon had their own literature and writing, there are very few written records of the Karen.

Over a thousand years ago ethnic Burmans began migrating to Burma. Burman kings slowly destroyed Mon and Arakenese kingdoms and invaded Thailand. But unlike the Thai kings, who modernised and avoided colonisation, the Burmese kings could not adapt to the modern world. The British destroyed the Burman monarchy and occupied Burma in 1863.

For Burma's ethnic minority groups, colonisation by the British meant liberation from oppressive rule. For the Burman majority, destruction of the monarchy meant loss of national pride. In the first half of the 20th century a Burmese independence movement emerged. During World War 2 the Burmese Independence Army (BIA) was founded by Aung San with support from the Japanese. When Burma was occupied by the Japanese the BIA carried out many atrocities against the Karen. In many Karen areas the BIA massacred entire Karen villages, and in Papun District Karen women were herded into camps where they were systematically raped by BIA soldiers.

The Karen consistently supported the British, fighting in small guerrilla units against the BIA and Japanese Army.

After World War 2 the British granted independence to Burma. It became clear that ethnic minority groups expected that in an independent Burma all ethnic groups would be equal, as they had been under the British. Burman leaders however expected that once the British had gone they would once again become the dominant ethnic group. Massacres of Karen villagers by Burman militias led to the Karen starting their "revolution" on 31 January 1949. The Mon ethnic group joined the Karen shortly after.

During the 1950s Burma was a shaky democracy, with an increasingly out of control army fighting against Communist and ethnic minority guerrilla armies. In 1962 the Burmese Army took power in a coup, and despite several name changes, has never relinquished power. Since

1962 almost every ethnic group in Burma has been involved in armed rebellion against the military regime.

The Burmese Army launched Burma on “the Burmese Way to Socialism”, which in practise meant banning foreign imports, confiscating all privately owned businesses and handing control of them to the families of senior military officers. While this was an effective way of gaining the loyalty of Burmese Army officers, it was also the beginning of the Burmese way to economic collapse.

Because Burma’s military-run economy could not produce the goods the country needed, imports were smuggled into Burma through black market trade gates in guerrilla zones. The Karen National Union (KNU) and other guerrilla armies quickly became rich with the revenue from taxes on imports and logging. The KNU spent this income on weapons for its armed wing, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), but also on building a parallel government in the “liberated zones” it controlled. The KNU set up a network of clinics and schools that provided better health and education than in government controlled areas.

During the 1960s the Burmese Army began “Four Cuts” operations. Rather than targeting guerrillas, the army targeted the civilians who supported the guerrillas. Villagers in “brown areas” were forcibly relocated to relocation sites under army control, where they could no longer give any support to the guerrillas. Anybody outside the relocation sites was shot on sight. In central Burma the “Four Cuts” operations succeeded in destroying the Karen guerrilla movement. Along the Thai-Burma border the KNLA was too strong and the area too mountainous for “Four Cuts” operations to succeed.

Beginning in 1984 the Burmese Army began capturing the KNU’s trade gates along the Thai-Burma border. While the KNU continued to control most of the Thai-Burma border, it lost most of the income it needed to buy weapons and ammunition on the black market. And as the KNU’s income declined, a proportionately larger portion of it was being pocketed by corrupt KNU leaders.

In 1988 there was a nation-wide democracy uprising in Burma. The military killed hundreds of democracy and jailed thousands more. Thousands fled to the Thai-Burma border and started the All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF). The KNU headquarters at

Manerplaw became the home to a dozen pro-democracy groups, and the target of massive Burmese Army offensives.

In 1994 several KNU units around Manerplaw mutinied in protest against the corruption and religious discrimination of the KNU leadership. While the KNU leadership is dominated by Christians, frontline KNLA units are made up almost entirely of Buddhists. Many Buddhists felt they were dying for the Karen Revolution, while Christian leaders were getting rich from it. The mutinying guerrillas formed the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA). After the KNU attacked the DKBA it formed an alliance with the Burmese Army and quickly captured Manerplaw.

The DKBA began attacking and burning refugee camps in Thailand, and at the same time expelling the family members of KNLA guerrillas from their villages.

In 1997 Burmese Army offensives in Dooplaya District and Mergui-Tavoy occupied the KNU's last "liberated zones".

From 1995 until 2003 the Burmese Army relocated hundred of Karen villages and turned mountain areas into "free-fire zones" while holding occasional ceasefire negotiations with the KNU.

In 2003 a power struggle within the Burmese Army ended ceasefire negotiations and made it clear that Karen refugees in Thailand would not be able to return home. Instead the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) began resettling Karen refugees in America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and some European countries.

In May 2008 Cyclone Nargis hit Burma, killing over 100,000 people. Most of the death and destruction was in the Irrawaddy Delta, where there are many Karen villages. After the cyclone the military regime focused its efforts on keeping foreign media and aid out of the delta, and survivors relied on local business people, monks and churches for assistance.

In 2010 there are continuing military offensives against the Karen and other ethnic groups, and while there are elections scheduled for 2010, it is unlikely that genuine democracy will come to Burma, or the suffering of the Karen people will end soon.

Case study - two Karen villages

Htee Khee and Htee Hta are two Karen villages in Karen State in eastern Burma⁴. They are in an area that was controlled by the Karen guerrilla movement until 1997, when it was occupied by the Burmese Army.

Htee Khee is a mountain village of about twenty houses. All of the houses are built from bamboo, with roofs made of palm fronds or teak leaves. Only the village school is built from timber.

Each house has an open living area, one small room where the whole family sleeps, and a small kitchen area. The houses are built on wooden posts about two metres from the ground, and the house is accessed by a bamboo ladder. The area under the house is used to store firewood and animals.

Except for one of the two village schoolteachers, everybody in the village is Skaw Karen. All of the villagers speak Skaw Karen, and those who have attended school read and write it, and are able to speak, read and write some Burmese as well.

There is one Christian family in the village. A Skaw Karen girl from another village graduated from bible school and came to the village as a missionary. The only person who she has converted to Christianity has been her husband, and their children are Christian too. She is one of two teachers in the village.

The other teacher is an ethnic Mon. Although he grew up in a Mon village, it is in Karen State and he grew up speaking Karen and Burmese as well as Mon. He spent his teenage years studying as a novice monk in Rangoon, and when he completed his studies he disrobed and returned to his village. He met his wife at a festival in a nearby village and they returned to Htee Khee to live. As well as being the village school teacher, his fluent Burmese, relatively educated status and knowledge of Burmese culture mean he is often called on to negotiate with the Burmese Army.

The villagers grow rice in paddy fields about fifteen minutes walk from the village. They also grow fruit and vegetables around the village. The village is mostly self-sufficient. The villagers weave their own clothing,

grow their own food, and build their own houses. Only rubber thongs, tools and medicines come from outside the village.

Apart from the Christian family, the villagers practise a mixture of Animism and Buddhism. The people of Htee Khee believe their environment is inhabited by many spirits. Some spirits are dangerous and small children especially need to be protected from them. Other spirits can, with some persuasion or inducement, be helpful. When Htee Khee villages go to Htee Hta they visit the monastery and participate in Buddhist ceremonies.

Karen guerrillas operate in the mountains above Htee Khee, and two or three times a year there are short battles between the guerrillas and the Burmese Army. If there are battles the villagers flee into the jungle or to Htee Hta. They are afraid that after a battle the Burmese Army will accuse them of supporting the guerrillas and torture, rape or kill them as revenge.

If Burmese Army patrols come to Htee Khee they steal chickens and force male villagers to go with them as “porters” to carry food and ammunition. On several occasions female villagers were taken as porters and they were gang raped by soldiers at night time.

Half an hour’s walk down the Htee river (Htee Khee means “top of the Htee river”) is Htee Hta village (Htee Hta means “end of the Htee river”). Htee Hta is surrounded by rice fields. The village has about one hundred houses, a church, a Buddhist monastery, a Burmese Army camp and a separate DKBA militia camp.

The older houses in Htee Hta are large and built out of wood. Like the houses in Htee Khee, they comprise an open living area, one or more rooms for sleeping in, and a kitchen. The houses are built on wooden posts, and the space under the house accommodates animals, firewood, ox carts, drying clothing, and rubbish.

Before 1997 “Kaw Thoo Lei” – as the people called the Karen guerrilla movement – built a school and a health clinic in the village. Both were supported by international aid agencies. When the village was captured by the Burmese Army the medic, several schoolteachers and their families fled to a refugee camp in Thailand. The school was taken over by the Burmese Army for use as their camp, and the clinic was torched.

Children now attend school in the monastery, where two monks and three villagers (one of them Christian) are teachers. Villagers who have money can buy Western medicines from the village shop, but increasing numbers of villagers treat illnesses with a combination of massage, magic and herbal medicines provided by the elderly Pa-O abbot of the monastery. The monastery holds monthly Full Moon festivals, where villagers gather to chant Buddhist *suttas* but also to socialise, share food and listen to traditional music.

Of the Htee Hta villagers, there are roughly equal numbers of Skaw Karen, Pwo Karen and ethnic Pa-O villagers. Skaw Karen and Burmese are the common languages in the village, but many villagers speak each other's languages. The three groups get on well together and there are many mixed marriages. Twenty Skaw Karen families and six Pwo Karen families are Christian. Only three Pa-O villagers – two women and a man - have converted to Christianity, all of them when they married into Christian Karen families.

Like the Htee Khee villagers, the Htee Hta villagers grow all of their own food. They also grow betel nut, which is sold in Burma, and chillies, which are sold in Thailand. Most of this income is paid to the Burmese Army as “taxes” but it also pays for clothing, medicines, cheroots and jewellery.

Villagers in Htee Hta and Htee Khee reminisce of the time when the area was controlled by “Kaw Thoo Lei”. The guerrillas demanded an annual tax and conscripted one male from every village each year. Otherwise the guerrillas left the villagers to their own devices, and built and staffed the school and clinic.

After the area was occupied Burmese Army soldiers raped, looted and tortured with impunity. The two church pastors were tortured after the Burmese Army learned that guerrilla leaders had worshipped at the church and been frequent visitors to the pastors. Since then the situation has improved slightly. While there are no more rapes inside the village, women working alone in the fields are sometimes raped by Burmese Army patrols. However the constant demands for “taxes” and the amount of time spent on forced labour has driven the villagers into poverty. Villagers can no longer afford to build houses from wood, instead building with bamboo. Some villagers have fled to refugee camps in Thailand, while others go to Thailand to work illegally.

Language and subgroups

Burma has a population of about 50 million. About half of the population are ethnic Burmans – the dominant ethnic group. The language they speak is the national language, but many ethnic minority people do not speak or read or write it. The rest of the population belongs to eight major ethnic minority groups – the Shan, the Karen, the Mon, the Kachin, the Chin, the Arakanese, the Rohingyas and Karenni – as well as several smaller groups. The Karen are the second largest ethnic minority group after the Shans.

There are a number of Karen sub-groups, and also some ethnic groups that maintain a distinct identity and see themselves as “cousins” of the Karen.

Skaw Karen

The Skaw Karen (who call themselves *Pwar Kar Nyan*) are the largest sub-group. Skaw Karen can be found in all Karen areas. All Skaw Karen speak the same language, although with significant regional variations. A Skaw Karen from the Irrawaddy Delta in central Burma and a Skaw Karen from Chiang Mai in Thailand will be able to converse, although with some difficulty. Burmese Skaw Karen write their language using a script based on Burmese that was developed by Baptist missionaries. Thai-Karens write their language using a Roman script. In refugee camps in Thailand Skaw Karen is used as a common language and taught in schools. Skaw Karen live in both mountain and lowland areas.

Pwo Karen

The Pwo Karen (who call themselves *Ploe*) are the second largest sub-group, and are also found in all Karen lowland areas. In Burma Pwo Karen traditionally only live in lowland areas, but Thai Pwo Karens live in mountain villages. There are two Pwo Karen languages, West Pwo Karen – spoken in central Burma – and East Pwo Karen – spoken in eastern Burma and Thailand. There are also two Pwo Karen scripts, one developed by missionaries, one by Buddhist monks.

Bwe Karen

The Bwe Karen (who call themselves *Bway*) live in Toungoo District in northern Karen State. They live in both mountain and lowland villages. They write their language using a Roman script developed by missionaries. Because Toungoo District is several weeks walk from the Thai border, Bwe Karen who are displaced by war are more likely to hide in the mountains than escape to refugee camps in Thailand.

Karenni

The Karenni are sometimes counted as a sub-group of the Karen by anthropologists. However most Karenni prefer to see themselves as “cousins” of the Karen, with a distinct separate identity. There are about 300,000 Karenni people living in Karenni State in Burma. About 20,000 live in refugee camps in Mae Hong Son Province in Thailand. The Karenni are even more ethnically and linguistically than the Karen, with seven different language groups. The Karenni use Burmese as a common language. Like the Karen, the Karenni were originally Animist, but many are now also Roman Catholic while some practise Buddhism.

Pa-O

Like the Karenni, the Pa-O are sometimes counted as a sub group of the Karen by anthropologists. But like the Karenni, they also like to maintain their distinct cultural identity. The Pa-O were one of the first ethnic groups in Burma to adopt Buddhism. Most Pa-O live in Shan State in northern Burma, but there also Pa-O villages throughout Karen State.

‘Karen Muslims’

When Burma was a British colony tens of thousands of Indian Muslims migrated to Burma. They settled in Burma and although they maintained their faith, their descendents speak Burmese and local ethnic languages, and have integrated into Burmese culture. Despite this, Muslims in Burma are very badly oppressed. Especially in conflict areas, Muslim villages and mosques are destroyed, forced labour is constant and Muslim girls and women are targeted for rape.

Some Muslims in Karen State have good and close relationships with the local Karen community and they have come to regard themselves

as “Karen Muslims”. In other places these close relationships do not exist and Muslims see themselves more as “Burmese Muslims”.

Mon, Shan and Thai

The Mon, Shan (Thai Yai) and Thai are three ethnic groups who are not related to the Karen. The Mon and Shan ethnic groups have their own states in Burma, but there are also Mon, Shan and Thai villages throughout Karen State. There are small numbers of Mon, Shan and Thai refugees living in Karen refugee camps, most having fled human rights abuses in their villages in Karen State. Almost all Mon, Shan and Thai people are Buddhist. Although the Shan and Thai refugees are related to the Thai people, they have no legal rights in Thailand.

Urban, rural and mountain people

As important as the difference between different ethnic groups and religions can be differences between people from urban, rural and mountain backgrounds.

Some people bridge their backgrounds effectively. For example, some university-educated Karen from Rangoon who joined “the revolution” in the mountains on the Thai-Burma border have been able to work effectively with mountain villagers. Other people from urban backgrounds cannot conceal their contempt for people from rural and urban backgrounds. Some people from lowland villages may likewise hold mountain villagers in contempt.

In the same way a Christian Karen from a mountain village may find he has much more in common and gets on better with a Buddhist Shan from a similar mountain background than he does with a Christian Karen from a city background.

The Karen flag and clothing

The Karen flag

The Karen flag (depicted on the cover) is red, white and blue. Red represents bravery, white represents purity, and blue represents honesty. In the top left corner are nine rays of sunshine representing the nine Karen districts, and a traditional Karen drum.

Karen traditional clothing

Traditionally Karen men wear a sarong and a sleeveless shirt, unmarried Karen women wear a long white dress, and married Karen women wear a sarong and sleeveless shirt. The design of male shirts and sarongs are different to female shirts and sarongs, and males and females tie their sarongs in different ways.

Different Karen sub-groups have different designs for their clothing, but all follow the same basic pattern. Different sub-groups also have different designs for their shoulder bags⁵.

Names and birthdays

Names

Karen people (and most people in Burma) traditionally have given names only; they do not have family names. Women do not change their name when they marry.

When Karen names are written in English they often have several parts. The last part of a name is not a family name.

Karen children may be given Karen names, Burmese names or Western names. The names of flowers are popular Karen names – for both boys and girls – as are favourable qualities. A girl might be called *Paw Htoo* (Gold Flower) and a boy *Law Eb* (Handsome). Both Buddhist and Christian Karen may give their children Western names, but usually only Christian Karen will give their children Karen versions of biblical names. *Yo Shu* (Joshua) and *Pol Lu* (Paul) are examples.

Names may also indicate place within the family. A son might be called *Maung Maung* (Burmese for “youngest son”) and his little sister *Mu Dar* (Karen for “youngest daughter”).

Karen people use honorifics. *Saw* and *Naw* are placed in front of the names of Skaw Karen males and females respectively. *Mahn*, *Sa* and *Nant* are placed in front of the names of Pwo Karen married men, unmarried men, and women respectively.

However these honorifics are only used in the third person. When speaking to someone it is impolite to address them using an honorific or their given name alone. Instead they are addressed using a familial term – for example Grandfather or Older Sister.

Grandfather	<i>Poo</i>	Grandmother	<i>Pee</i>
Uncle	<i>Tee</i>	Aunt	<i>Moogar</i>
Father	<i>Bpar</i>	Mother	<i>Mor</i>
Older brother	<i>Jaw</i>	Older sister	<i>Nob</i>
Younger brother	<i>Tay Kwar</i>	Younger sister	<i>Tay Moo</i>
Nephew	<i>Paw Ta Kwar</i>	Niece	<i>Paw Ta Moo</i>
Son	<i>Por Kwar</i>	Daughter	<i>Por Moo</i>

Addressing someone in this way does not necessarily mean they are related in any way. Nor does it necessarily infer friendliness or affection. Complete strangers are also addressed this way.

Usually only parents or parents-in-law are addressed as *Bpar* or *Mor*.

When Karen men or women ordain as monks or nuns they are given a *dhamma* name. This name is in Pali, the ancient Buddhist language, and is determined by the day of the week they were born on. If they disrobe they revert to a Karen or Burmese name. Karen monks are addressed as *thokar* and nuns as *pee wab*.

Karen laypeople will often be known by a nickname rather than by their given name. This nickname may be the name of their village, or refer to a physical attribute. For example, *Naw Baw* means “Miss Fatty”.

Karen parents or grandparents are often called by the name of their oldest child or grandchild, even by their partners. For example, Naw Paw Htoo’s father might address his wife as *Naw Paw Htoo Mor*, or “Naw Paw Htoo’s Mother”.

More romantically minded couples address each other as *Thar*, or “Heart”.

Birthdays

Karen in mountain villages may not record birthdays at all, and in some cases may not know exactly how many years old they are.

Buddhist Karen may record their birthdays according to the Buddhist lunar calendar, which does not match the Western calendar.

Karens born in refugee camps will usually have a birth certificate issued by the camp authorities and have an accurate birth date that follows the Western calendar.

Karen Festivals

The Karen have many festivals through the year. These festivals may be political or be based in Animism, Christianity or Buddhism. Despite suffering war and exile, Karen people take every opportunity to come together to celebrate their religions and culture.

Karen New Year

The Karen New Year is based on the full moon and is held on the first day of the month of Pyathoe in the Buddhist Lunar Calendar – in December or January in the Western calendar.

The Karen New Year marks the end of the harvest of one rice crop, the beginning of the next rice crop, and the time when new houses are built.

Karen New Year celebrations include singing, *Don* and bamboo dances, speeches, and eating sticky rice and fried chicken.

Revolution Day

Karen Revolution Day commemorates the beginning of the Karen uprising on 31 January 1949. At KNLA bases inside Burma military parades are held at dawn, followed by speeches and traditional Karen dancing. Karen in Thailand and around the world also celebrate Karen New Year, although without the military parades.

Buddhist New Year

The Buddhist New Year (also known as the Water Festival or *Thingyan*) is shared by all Buddhists in Burma. For one week Karen villagers will throw water at each other, go to each other's houses to eat and drink, and if they are Buddhist, go to monasteries as well.

During the Buddhist new year a ceremony is held where people make offerings to monks who chant *suttas* from the Buddhist scriptures. The merit is dedicated to ghosts so they can escape this unhappy realm of existence and be reborn in a happier existence.

Wrist Tying

An annual wrist tying ceremony is held in August each year. The festival includes singing, dancing and eating

Smaller wrist tying ceremonies can be held throughout the year – see the section on Animism. In addition, Buddhist monks may chant a blessing and tie a white or yellow string around the wrists of laypeople who visit them.

Martyrs' Day

Martyrs' Day is held on 17 August, which is the anniversary of the death of Saw Ba U Gyi. Martyrs' Day is now a day in which all Karen people who have died in the civil war are commemorated.

Kathina

For three months during the rainy season Buddhist monks and nuns should observe a "Rains Retreat" and return to sleep in the same monastery each night. In the month after the rains retreat a *Kathina*, or Robe Offering Ceremony is held, where laypeople offer new robes to monks. At least four monks must be present to hold a *Kathina* ceremony. If a monastery does not have enough monks they will invite monks from another monastery, and monks may attend several *Kathina* ceremonies during the month.

Christmas

Christmas is celebrated wherever there are Christian Karens. In Burma Christian Karens celebrate Christmas by going house to house and singing Christmas carols on 1st December, and going to church and inviting their Buddhist neighbours for meals of noodles or sticky rice on 25th December.

Other festivals

The KNU has established other festivals such as Karen National Day and KWO Day. More widely celebrated are Full Moon Days. Throughout Karen State (and most of South-East Asia) villagers go to monasteries to offer food to monks and pray, and sometimes hold parades through their villages.

Food

Food plays a central role in Karen culture. A common Karen greeting is *Aw mee wee lee ar* – “Have you finished eating?”

Eating together is a way of expressing hospitality and creating bonds.

Karen people eat white rice, and lots of it. Traditionally Karen people eat twice a day, in the morning at about 10 am, and in the afternoon at about 4 pm.

A good Karen meal would include large bowls of rice, a bowl of pork curry, a bowl of stir-fried meat and vegetables, a bowl of soup, and a small bowl of fishpaste or chillies. The bowls of curries and soups are shared.

Most Karen villagers and refugees do not usually eat this well. A more common meal would be rice, a few boiled vegetables and fishpaste.

Karen in Burma eat with the right hand, but Karen who have been exposed to Thai culture will eat with a fork and spoon.

Buddhist monks traditionally only eat one or two meals a day, and do not eat after midday. However there is now an awareness that only eating in the morning combined with a poor diet often leads to diabetes, and many Karen monks in rural areas or refugee camps eat a small “medicine meal” in the evening. (As do Tibetan monks and many Thai monks living in rural northern Thailand.) Traditionally monks only eat food placed in their bowls, but monks in rural areas and refugee camps may cook their own food.

At weddings or Christian or Buddhist festivals communities often cook noodles or eat sticky (glutinous) rice instead of normal white rice.

Karen also like to eat wild food, hunting or gathering vegetables in the forest. There are very few animals the Karen will not eat.

Education

Karen people generally place an enormous value on education.

The Buddha taught that there are four classes of people that his followers should bow down before: Buddhas, monks, parents and teachers. Buddhist Karens may prostrate three times in front of a respected teacher, as they would to a monk or Buddha statue. Thai-Karens hold an annual *Waan Kbru* ceremony where schoolchildren offer their teachers incense, candles or flowers – the same offering made to a Buddha statue.

Christian Karens also hold teachers in high respect. *Thera* (for male teachers) or *Theramu* (for female teachers) is a term of great respect. It is very rude to address a teacher by their given name.

Traditionally, Karen monks taught children (male and female) to read and write. When Burma was a British colony monastic education was slowly replaced by secular education. Christian missionaries also played an important role in providing education, although mission schools were usually only open to Christian Karens.

However as Burma's economy continues to go backwards the role of monks as teachers is now increasing. Many parents cannot afford for their children to attend government schools, and send them to monastery schools where monks (usually not well educated themselves) teach for free.

Most children in Burma now do not complete primary school, either because their parents need them to work, because their parents cannot afford to pay for their education, or because there are no schools where they live.

The passion Karens have for education means that they will try to set up schools wherever they can. Karen villagers who flee into the jungle after their villages are destroyed will often start by building a temporary school, and then build huts to live in while their children study.

Religion

Religion is far more important for most Karen than it is for most Westerners. Religion is not just a matter of belief: religion may determine, or be determined by, who somebody marries, the school they go to, or whether they are resettled or whether they remain in a refugee camp.

It is important to understand that different religions (with the exception of Islam) are not exclusive categories. Karen Buddhists, Animists and Christians have more or less the same belief system. What differentiates the different groups is what religious practises they engage in and which group they chose to be identified with. Most Karen practise Buddhism and Animism, and there is no conflict between the practises of the two groups. Lowland Pwo Karen are usually strong Buddhists who also practise Animism, while mountain Skaw Karen have less contact with Buddhism and Animism is a more important part of their religious practise. A minority of Karens practise Christianity, which does not allow its followers to engage in the practises of other religions.

Animism

Traditionally, Karen people followed Animism. Animists believe the world is inhabited by spirits that are usually – but not always - invisible to humans. These spirits may live in trees, in rivers, in mountains, in normal houses, or houses built specifically for them. Some of these spirits are dangerous, and protective measure must be taken against them. For example, spirits cannot climb an odd number of rungs on a ladder so ladders to Karen houses always have an odd number of rungs. Many Karen in Australia will not rent a house unless it has an odd number of steps.

Spirits that live in villages or houses are much like elderly relatives: morally conservative, easily angered, but can be appeased if shown respect and given small gifts. Sex outside of marriage is taboo because it angers these spirits, who may react by destroying the whole village's crops, or in Australia, by causing a car accident.

An important Animist belief is that everyone has thirty-seven *klar* (or spirits) living within them: thirty-six minor *klar* and one major *klar*. If

one or more minor *klar* wander away from the body the person may become sick. If the major *klar* wanders away they may become crazy. In either case a traditional healer will hold a wrist-tying ceremony where the wandering *klar* is lured back with gifts of fruit, rice and betel nut. A white string is tied around the wrist of an adult, or the neck of a small child, to prevent the *klar* wandering away again. If all thirty-seven *klar* leave a person they will die.

Animist beliefs vary across different regions of Karen State. Karen Animist beliefs have both similarities and differences to Burmese *nat* or Thai *phi* beliefs. Animist beliefs are not unchanging. An Animist who gets sick may take antibiotics as well as asking a traditional healer to hold a wrist-tying ceremony.

In the past Animist beliefs were seen as being backwards. There is now a growing recognition that the Animist belief that humans must live in relationship with the wider environment is not backwards, but is essential if the human race is to survive in the future.

Buddhism

Buddhism is the religion founded by Gautama Buddha in India two and a half thousand years ago. As there are cave shrines in Kagun in Karen State that are almost two thousand years old, it is likely that some Karen people have been following Buddhism since this time.

It is important to understand that the Buddha was not a god, and the Buddha does not answer prayers. The Buddha taught, “Do good; avoid evil; purify your heart: this is the heart of the Buddha’s teachings.”

All Buddhist teachings follow from this. Buddhist practises such as chanting or bowing down before Buddha images, pagodas or monks are intended to cultivate respect for the values they represent.

There are some Buddhist beliefs that are important because they form the worldview of most Karen⁶:

- ❖ **Kamma** – the doctrine of *kamma* states that every action has a consequence. Actions with a positive intention have a positive result, actions with a negative intention have a negative result. *Kamma* is not a Buddhist equivalent of divine punishment, it is simply the logical result of one’s actions. Lung cancer is simply the logical result of a lifetime of smoking, not divine punishment. The

results of *kamma* can manifest in this lifetime or a future lifetime. It is also important to understand that *kamma* is not like a bank account - positive *kamma* will not cancel out negative *kamma*. Positive actions and negative actions will all have their results. No matter how many pagodas the Burmese generals build, one day they will have to accept the fruit of their negative *kamma*.

- ❖ **Rebirth** – when a person dies they are reborn in either the hell realm, the animal realm, the wandering ghost realm, the human realm, or the heaven realm. The exception is an *arahat*, a monk who has completely eliminated hatred and greed, who is not reborn after they die. However it is extremely rare for a person to become an *arahat*. From a doctrinal Buddhist point of view, the best rebirth is as a human because this is where there is the most opportunity for spiritual development. However many Burmese and Karen Buddhists aspire to a rebirth of some tens of thousands of years of bliss in the heaven realm before they are next reborn as humans. Unlike in the Christian cosmology, no rebirth is permanent.
- ❖ **Impermanence** – Everything, good or bad, is impermanent, or *anicca*. This makes suffering bearable in the knowledge that it will end. It also means that we should appreciate the good things that we have, because they will too inevitably come to an end.
- ❖ **Dana** – or giving. *Dana* has both religious and social importance. *Dana* can be given to monks, churches or to social causes. The *cetana* or motivation for giving is as important as what is given. If the motivation is genuine generosity or compassion then the donor will get a lot of merit, even if the *dana* is small. If the motivation is to impress others or to gain merit, the merit gained will be small even if the gift or donation is very big.

For most Karen people who practise Buddhism and Animism there is no distinction between the two religions and life in general. There is usually no conflict in taking part in the practices of different religions. From a Buddhist point of view, there is no problem with a Buddhist who decides to join his Christian friends in being baptised one week; takes part in an Animist wrist-tying ceremony the next week; and then ordains as a Buddhist monk the week after. Buddhism does not deny the existence of God – or many deities – or forbid Buddhists seeking their assistance. Many Karen Buddhists feel they can pray to Jesus or God while continuing to be Buddhists.

Buddhist monks and nuns

Most Karen Buddhist males ordain twice: once as a novice monk when they are about ten, and once as a monk when they are about twenty. Normally they only ordain for about a week. Older men whose children have all married may also ordain and live in a monastery until they die. Children who are orphans or come from poor families may ordain as novice monks and live in a monastery while they study in high school. When they complete their studies most will disrobe. A small proportion of monks ordain for much longer periods, or their whole life.

It is less common for women to ordain as nuns. The ritual status of nuns is lower than monks and they receive less support. However nuns receive a different kind of respect as it is assumed that women do not ordain unless they are serious about practising Buddhism.

Monks and nuns' daily life includes chanting and meditation, but most also serve the community. Monks and nuns may be childcare workers, teachers, counsellors, mediators and herbal doctors as well as community and religious leaders. In conflict areas monks often negotiate with the Burmese Army on behalf of villagers.

Christianity

In 1852 an American Baptist missionary named Adnirom Judson began converting Animist Karen to Christianity after years of fruitless attempts to convert Burmese and Karen Buddhists. Some Animist Karen had a "creation story" which told of two brothers: a Karen brother and a "white" brother. The Karen deity, *Y'wab*, gave the Karen brother a holy book. The Karen brother did not take care of the holy book and the white brother took it and left on a journey. The story foretold that one day the white brother would return with the holy book. Judson received a predictably enthusiastic response from these Karen. Anglican, Catholic and Seventh Day Adventist missionaries began working with the Karen later. However of the 15% of Karen who are now estimated to be Christian, most are Baptist. Seventh Day Adventist missionaries have been the least successful, mainly because they are not allowed to eat pork. Pork is the favourite food of most Karen and giving it up is not attractive.

In Burma, particularly in conflict areas, being a Christian can be dangerous. The Burmese Army and DKBA suspect all Christians as being KNU supporters, and Christians are closely watched. Many Christian pastors have been killed and Christian churches have been burned. It is often unclear whether Christian pastors are killed because of religious hatred or because of their suspected links to the KNU. As a minority group, Christians in Burma generally try to build good relationships with their Buddhist neighbours, and Christian pastors are careful not to be seen to be disrespectful of Buddhism.

Many Christian pastors have strong relationships with their Buddhist counterparts, and there are stories of Buddhist monks intervening to prevent DKBA or Buddhist Army soldiers attacking religious minority groups.

In refugee camps in Thailand the situation is different. Aid for refugees is often channelled through Christian aid agencies or through local Karen churches. When a family becomes Christian they may be able to get more material assistance, and also increase their chances of being resettled in a Western country. The proportion of Karen in refugee camps who are Christian is much higher than anywhere else, although the majority of Karen refugees are still Buddhist.

Islam

Although there are Muslims living in Karen State, very few Karen have converted to Islam and this has only been when they have married into Muslim families. Virtually all other Muslims are of Indian origin.

Pilgrimage

Regardless of which religion they belong to, Karen people love to go on a long journey with their family, their friends, or even the whole village, with a religious destination at the end. For Buddhist Karen this may be a pilgrimage to a famous Buddhist centre such as Thamanya or the Kyaiktyo (Golden Rock) Pagoda.

For Christians, the destination may be the ordination of a pastor, the opening of a new church, or a church convention. A pilgrimage is an opportunity for sightseeing combined with very genuine religious practise.

Karen people and religious discrimination

Unfortunately there is a long history of religious discrimination among the Karen. Until 1995 the Karen National Union (KNU) and its armed wing the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) controlled large “liberated areas” along the Thai-Burma border, as well as having effective control of refugee camps in Thailand. While the majority of Karen people - and most KNLA guerrillas - are Buddhist, the KNU leadership is dominated by Karen Christians. Some KNU leaders used their positions both to enrich themselves and their families and to coerce Buddhists into converting to Christianity. In some areas Buddhists were not allowed to build monasteries or pagodas, the ordination of children as novices was banned (novice monks could not be conscripted as child soldiers), and KNLA guerrillas were refused leave to attend Buddhist festivals and were denied promotion. In refugee camps food and other aid to refugees was often channelled through Christian leaders. Some Buddhist Karen refugees literally became “rice Christians” so they could get more food to eat.

Discrimination was not only against Buddhists, but against different Christian denominations. Many senior KNU leaders were Seventh Day Adventists, and they pressured Baptist and other Christian Karens to become Seventh Day Adventists as well.

In 1994 KNLA guerrillas around the headquarters at Manerplaw mutinied in protest against the corruption and discrimination. They formed the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), allied themselves with the Burmese Army, and captured Manerplaw.

The DKBA soon turned out to be far worse than the KNU. While the DKBA burned some churches and forced some Christians to convert to Buddhism, they tortured, raped and looted in Buddhist and Christian villages alike. Karen Buddhist monks who criticised the DKBA’s actions as being opposite to Buddhist teachings have been persecuted or had their monasteries destroyed.

The people who have suffered most from the DKBA are not Christians, but Muslims. DKBA soldiers have burned Muslim villages, used Muslim cemeteries as pig farms, and in some cases forced Muslims to demolish their own mosques.

Power, authority and hierarchy

Karen people live in a world where power is held by men with guns, and organisations that are authoritarian, corrupt and unaccountable.

In Burma Karen people may live under the authority of the KNLA, the DKBA, the Burmese Army, or all three groups. The KNLA is a usually benign, authoritarian military organisation; the Burmese Army and DKBA oppressive and rapacious military organisations.

In Thailand Karen refugees live under the authority of a number of organisations: the Thai Ministry of Interior; the Thai Army, and a camp administration. The Thai Ministry of Interior and the Thai Army are arbitrarily violent and corrupt; camp leaders may be unelected.

The UNHCR and a number of international NGOs also support Karen refugees. But the UNHCR and NGOs are ultimately accountable to their funding bodies rather than the refugees, and refugees have little decision making power in these organisations.

The exception to these experiences is Buddhist monasteries and Christian churches. Because involvement in these organisations is voluntary they are largely democratic and accountable. In theory, churches and monasteries alike are male-dominated organisations, but because women play such a large role most monks and pastors listen to women's voices very carefully before making decisions. Religious organisations are the only independent civil society in Burma, and provide many valuable social welfare services.

Karen society is also very hierarchical. Hierarchical differences include older people/younger people; males/females; educated/uneducated; urban/rural; lowland/mountain; and in the view of some Christians, Christian/Buddhist.

Marriage & families

For Karen people the family is vitally important. Unlike in Western cultures where there is a strong emphasis on the individual, it is the family that is all-important for the Karen. While it is the immediate family that is most important, the extended family is also very important.

In central Burma parents traditionally arrange marriages for their children. Some arranged marriages work well, while some are disasters. Karen families in central Burma often likewise arrange marriages for their children. In eastern Burma arranged marriages are less common, and most Karen marriages are love matches. The Karen believe very strongly in the ideals of romantic love, faithfulness and life-long partnership.

Because pre-marital sex angers spirits, which can lead to crop failure or illness, in rural Karen villages unmarried men and women can talk to each other but not do much else. If a young man and woman are seen to have physical contact or suspected of having sex they are expected to marry immediately. Traditionally adultery is dealt with by killing both the man and woman involved.

A Karen couple who want to marry against the wishes of their parents just have to disappear into the forest for one night, and when they return in the morning the village will organise their immediate marriage.

Animist and Buddhist weddings are conducted in the family home, as are Christian weddings if it is suspected the couple have had sex, or the couple are from different Christian denominations. Church weddings are only held in a church if it is certain the couple are virgins, and the couple belong to the same Christian denomination.

It is normal for friends of the same sex to be physically affectionate. Two male friends (or two female friends) may hold hands or put their arms around each others shoulders. People will usually only hug if they are upset. Friends of the same sex will “sleep together” for warmth. All of this is considered to be platonic and not sexual.

Married couples are not physically affectionate in public, and kissing is what married couples do in the bedroom.

In the *Sigalovada Sutta* the Buddha taught that the husband and wife have separate duties in the home. A husband's duties include being polite, respectful, faithful, buying his wife jewellery and giving her authority over the home. A wife's duties include being faithful, taking care of the house and looking after visitors and relatives.

Christian teachings state more explicitly that a husband "is supreme in the family" and that a wife "submits to her husband".

In practise power relations in each family vary. There are some Karen families where the husband beats the wife and controls the family; there are families where the husband and wife share decision-making; and there are families where the wife makes most decisions.

Marriage outside the group

Karen people are usually open to marriages between Karens and non-Karens. In Australia, several Karens have married Anglo-Australians and there is a growing recognition that Anglo-Australians can be as good or bad partners as anyone else. Many Karens disapprove of marriages between Karen women and Burman or Thai men, as their experience is that Thai men are usually unfaithful and Burman men are often violent towards their wives.

Marriage between different religions can be more problematic than marriage between different ethnic groups. Most Christian Karen insist that their children must marry other Christians, and a Buddhist would have to convert to Christianity before marrying into their family. Buddhist families would not normally want a Christian to convert to Buddhism, but would want a Christian marrying into their family to participate in Buddhist ceremonies.

Homosexuality

The Karen say there are no gay or lesbians among them. However they add that there are some men who are born with "the heart of a woman", and some women born with "the heart of a man". It is only natural for these people to be attracted to someone of the same sex. Because it is believed that underneath they are not really the gender they appear to be, these are considered heterosexual relationships. War and poverty creates many children who lack parents, so a gay or lesbian couple who want to have children will have no problem adopting.

Burmans are very homophobic, and Karen people who have grown up in cities and been influenced by Burman culture will probably be homophobic.

Violence against women

Karen people say that traditionally family and sexual violence was rare. However war and life in refugee camps has made both more common. In refugee camps women may be raped by Thai soldiers or police, but also by their Karen relatives or neighbours. Most rapes go unreported, but even where a rape is reported it is unlikely the rapist will be punished. Some religious leaders are trying to tackle the issue, but many churches are very conservative. There have been occasions where women who reported rape have been expelled from their churches for “adultery”.

Social life

Visiting

Karen people like to visit each other, and in a traditional Karen village there is not much else to do. No invitation is necessary. On arrival visitors will take their cue from their hosts as to whether they should stay five minutes or five hours. Hosts will always invite visitors to eat, and visitors always politely decline. If the hosts really want their visitors to eat, they will either move a table and food in front of them, or take them by their hand and lead them to the eating area.

Sport

Karen people love playing sport, and they share a passion for soccer with the Thai and Burmese. Karen in Australia play soccer both in all-Karen clubs, in local community clubs, or both. Another sport Karen play is “jin law”. Players have to keep a small rattan ball in the air for as long as possible. Any part of the body can be used to hit the ball, except for the hands.

Videos

In refugee camps and many Karen villages there are “video halls” which contain benches, a TV, and a video player (and more recently a DVD player). In order of popularity are Burmese films, Thai films, Indian films and Western films – often appalling B-grade films.

Some villagers pool their money and buy a TV, video and diesel generator which is installed in the Buddhist monastery.

In Burma traders load a TV, video player and generator onto the back of an ox-cart and go around smaller villages, staying a few nights in each village and showing videos.

Religious ceremonies

Buddhist Karen will invite one or more monks to their house for significant occasions, together with friends and neighbours, and possibly the whole village. The monks will lead those gathered in chanting, and deliver a short talk on Buddhism. The monk will then be offered food before everyone else eats. Christian Karen hold an almost identical “thanksgiving service” but with pastors rather than monks.

Gambling, alcohol and other drugs

Alcohol is an integral part of traditional Karen culture. Villagers make a mildly alcoholic beer from sticky rice. This beer can be drunk on its own, or more commonly is distilled to make a much stronger rice whiskey.

When men drink they will sit in a circle with a bottle of alcohol and one cup. The bottle and cup are passed from person to person. Each person fills the cup, quickly drinks the alcohol and passes it on to the next person. The group will also share fried meat and betel nut. Drinking continues until the alcohol runs out or the participants collapse or fall asleep.

Buddhist and Christian teachings that forbid alcohol consumption are ignored, and virtually all Karen men drink alcohol. The only exception are Buddhist monks and Christian pastors who take their roles seriously. Unmarried women generally do not drink, but older women may drink in small groups. Men and women rarely drink together.

Traditionally Karen do not use drugs, although some villagers grow marijuana to feed to elephants and to cook in stews.

In a traditional Karen village a number of factors ensure that little damage is done by this alcohol or drug use. War or life in a refugee camp removes many of these preventative factors and alcohol and drug abuse lead to social problems. In addition to alcohol and marijuana, Karen people are now exposed to heroin and amphetamines. The DKBA is widely believed to be involved in manufacturing and trafficking amphetamines.

Traditional Karen villagers were self-sufficient and had little to do with cash or gambling. However gambling is part of Burmese, Thai and Shan culture and Karen people who have contact with these cultures may gamble.

In refugee camps gambling and alcohol and drug abuse is linked to family violence, poverty, and sexual abuse.

Karen refugees have set up an NGO to tackle alcohol and drug abuse in the camps⁷.

Life in refugee camps

From the time Burma's civil war started in 1949 civilians have been displaced by war. Until 1984 Karen civilians would flee to "liberated zones" on the Thai-Burma border. In 1984 the Burmese Army attacked Kaw Moo Rah and Mae Tha Wor on the Thai-Burma border and Karen refugees began fleeing across the border into Thailand.

Often entire communities would just move a kilometre across the border, and when it became clear they could not return they would rebuild in a refugee camp. The KNU ran a parallel government in the liberated zones and this was recreated in the refugee camps, with schools, clinics, police and courts. Skaw Karen is used in refugee camps as a common language and is taught and used as the language of instruction in refugee schools. English, Thai and Burmese are taught as additional languages. More recently schools providing skills training and post-high school education have been established.

Christian churches, Buddhist monasteries and Muslim mosques were also built in the refugee camps, and there is a Baptist theological college in Mae La refugee camp.

A consortium of aid agencies provides rations of rice and fishpaste⁸. Refugees grow their own vegetables and raise chickens and pigs. Refugees who have employment in the camps as teachers or medics receive salaries from aid organisations. Other refugees work outside the camps, although they risk being detained, robbed and sometimes raped by Thai police or soldiers if caught.

Between 1995 and 1999 the DKBA and Burmese Army attacked and burned down several refugee camps in Thailand, and some camps were relocated to safer locations.

However the refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border are probably among the safest and best organised in the world, and this is very much due to Karen refugees themselves. A major challenge for camps now is replacing the large number of refugee teachers, medics and NGO staff being resettled in Western countries.

Most visitors find refugee camps to be surprisingly pleasant and happy places. Houses are built from bamboo and thatched with teak leaves,

often divided by vegetable gardens, people are at least superficially happy and happy.

Many Karen refugees are now being resettled in America, Australia and other Western countries. Resettlement is a contentious issue. One impact of resettlement is that most medics, schoolteachers and other educated refugees are leaving the camps, creating a skills shortage. Neither do all refugees want to be resettled. While many say they want to resettle in a Western country so their children have a better future, others are concerned about losing their traditional culture and way of life. As increasing numbers of refugees resettle accurate information about life in Western countries is reaching the camps.

While most Karen refugees resettling in Australia have positive experiences, refugees in America receive much less government support and find life much harder. A few Karen refugees have even returned from America, saying they are better off living in a refugee camp.

Visiting refugee camps

It is Thai government policy that Western visitors to refugee camps require permission from the Ministry of Interior, and generally cannot sleep overnight in the camps. This policy is applied differently in different camps, and in some camps visitors may be allowed to visit during the daytime or be allowed to live in the camps for short periods.

There are opportunities to volunteer in the camps, particularly for people who have skills in medicine or health, education or community development. People who want to volunteer but who do not have relevant skills can consider doing a short course in teaching English as a second language, and then assisting teaching English.

Visitors need to be careful they do not make promises they cannot keep. Visitors may be asked for assistance for applying for funding for programs, or assistance resettling in Western countries. Visitors are encouraged to help as they can, but do not make promises they cannot deliver.

Employment

In traditional Karen villages people are farmers, teachers, traditional healers, traders or Buddhist monks. Except for people who are only farmers, most people will combine these occupations. Many monks are teachers and healers as well, and most teachers or traders will be part-time farmers.

When the British colonised Burma many Karens were recruited as nurses, colonial administrators, or soldiers. Karen in both Thailand and Burma are skilled mahouts (elephant drivers) and work in logging.

In the Karen “liberated zones” the KNU set up a parallel government and trained their own teachers and medics. Many Karen have also been soldiers. Karens have a reputation as being tough and fearless soldiers who enjoy going into battle. Many Thai-Karen serve in the Thai Army in combat units.

Many Karen who have lived in refugee camps have been trained by Western NGOs as medics, midwives, teachers, community development workers, or alcohol and drug counsellors.

What does all this mean for resettlement?

Language and subgroups

It is important to understand that Karen people speak a number of languages. The only way to find out what languages people speak is by asking them. It is not unusual for different members of a family to speak different languages. For example, a Pa-O father may speak Pa-O, Burmese and Skaw Karen while his mountain Karen wife speaks only Skaw Karen. Their son who grew up and was educated in the refugee camp may be able to speak Skaw Karen, limited Pwo Karen and English, but have little Burmese. Their daughter who was educated in a Thai school is fluent in that language as well as Skaw Karen, but does not speak Pwo Karen or Burmese at all.

Most Pwo Karen who have lived in refugee camps will be able to speak Skaw Karen, and if they have studied in the camps they will be able to read and write it too. Karen children who have grown up in refugee camps will usually speak little or no Burmese.

The difference between Karen from urban, rural and mountain backgrounds can be significant. Because they are often better educated, speak English and used to living in a city environment, Karen from urban backgrounds are often hired to work as interpreters or bilingual settlement workers with newly-arrived refugees. Sometimes this works well, but if the Karen from urban background look down on rural and mountain Karen there will be endless problems. Training up Karen from rural and mountain backgrounds is a very good investment.

Names

Karen naming conventions do not match Western naming conventions. Karen refugees first encounter this problem when they fill in application forms for resettlement and find a field requiring their family name. For resettlement in Australia it is acceptable to write the given name in the family name field and leave the given name field blank. More commonly Karen refugees write the name of a paternal grandfather in the family name field.

Very few Karen in Australia adopt Western names, instead believing that if Australians can learn Greek, Italian and Vietnamese names they can also learn to pronounce Karen names too.

Issues with interpreters

In Australia there have been issues with Karen interpreters:

- ❖ Unlike interpreters for other languages, there is currently no accreditation for Karen interpreters, and would-be interpreters do not have to sit a test.
- ❖ Many Karen interpreters will not seek clarification if they do not understand something. Most Karen interpreters do not carry a dictionary. Karen interpreters who do not understand something may make it up instead.
- ❖ Confidentiality is non-existent. Whatever an interpreter hears will be repeated throughout the community. Interpreters have been known to telephone housemates to “warn them” about a client’s medical conditions. Karen women who have been raped will not disclose this to a trauma and torture counsellor unless they are comfortable having this information broadcast throughout the community. If confidentiality is important it is better to use a Burmese or Thai interpreter, if these languages are spoken.
- ❖ Some interpreters are community leaders, and have used their positions to coerce clients to join their organisations.
- ❖ There have been cases of Karen interpreters sexually harassing clients, asking clients to buy them lunch, or demanding money from clients.

Professionals working with interpreters should be aware of these issues and not hesitate to make a complaint if they believe the interpreter is not competent or is acting unethically.

Food

Karen refugees arriving in Australia will want to eat rice. Generally they will want to eat Thai jasmine rice. While there are very few Burmese shops in Australia, most Karen will be able to find all of the food they are used to eating in Vietnamese shops.

Some Karen are used to living on a diet of rice, chillies and a few vegetables, and continue to eat like this in Australia, spending very little money on food. Other families find that after a lifetime of borderline malnutrition they can eat as much fried pork, ice cream and soft drink as they like every day.

The Karen flag

Karen people are very proud of their flag and many Karen in Australia hang the Karen flag on the wall of their living room. Other Karen assume this is illegal in Australia and need reassurance that they can freely display their culture.

Clothing

Unlike many other ethnic groups in Australia who only wear traditional clothing at festivals, many Karen wear their traditional clothing on a daily basis. Depending on the weather, it may be necessary to wear Western clothing in addition to traditional Karen clothing. Other Karen wear Western clothing but carry Karen shoulder bags.

Education

Karen refugees who migrate to Western countries will have a variety of educational backgrounds. Most will have completed at least a few years of schooling and be able to read and write in Karen or Burmese.

Karen refugees often struggle with the Australian education system. While the education system in refugee camps is changing away from rote-learning, many Karen are unused to student-centred or problem-based teaching methodologies. Most Karen students find it challenging adjusting to a new education system while simultaneously learning a new language.

Some values learned at school will clash with traditional Karen values. For example, at home young Karens are taught to look down at the ground when people in authority speak to them: at school they are taught to make eye contact with their teachers.

It is very rude to address a teacher by name rather than addressing them as “teacher”, and many Karen in adult education settings feel uncomfortable when their teachers ask them to address by their given names.

While most Australian primary- or high-school students can get assistance with their homework from their parents, most Karen parents have even less English skills than their children. “Homework clubs” where volunteer tutors assist Karen refugee children with their homework can make an enormous difference.

However Karen students come from a culture that values education very highly, and when Karen students receive the support they need they can be very successful in their studies.

Employment

Very few Karen have qualifications that can be directly transferred to working in Australia. Karen teacher qualifications, for example, are not recognised in Australia, but some Karen teachers have gained employment as multicultural education aides. Some medics are also retraining as disability workers.

Most Karen say the two greatest obstacles to employment are having sufficient “Australian” English, and not having a car and/or drivers license. When they overcome these obstacles most Karen can get work.

Most Karen are very honest and hardworking, and organisations that employ one Karen often chose to employ their family and friends as well. Entrenched unemployment is unlikely to be a problem for Karen communities.

Religion

Karen people arriving in Australia are keen to practise their religion. While this is generally straightforward for Karen Christians who will be able to find a church of their preferred denomination, it can be harder for Karen Buddhists to find a place to practise.

Karen Buddhists in Australia often find themselves under pressure from Karen Christians to convert to Christianity. Where Karen Buddhists are accommodated with Karen Christians or their settlement workers are Karen Christians, this pressure can be very strong.

There are Burmese Buddhist monasteries in Western Australia, Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland. There are Karen Buddhist monasteries in Bendigo and Melbourne. Elsewhere Karen Buddhists may want to join Thai, Lao or Tibetan Buddhist communities.

Karen Buddhists have often been told that all westerners are Christian, and meeting Anglo-Australian Buddhists – especially Anglo-Australians who have ordained as Buddhist monks and nuns – is a empowering experience for them.

Addresses of Buddhist centres in Australia and worldwide can be found at <http://www.buddhanet.info/wbd/>

Marriage & families

Different Karen families adapt to life in Australia in different ways. Where partners are flexible; accept that changing countries may mean changing roles; and share decision-making, life in a new country may not place stresses on a marriage.

Where partners – usually the husband – are not willing to accept change or share decision-making family conflict follows. Despite strong stigma around separation and divorce, some families do split up.

Many Karen parents use physical punishment to discipline children, which can lead to intervention by child protection authorities. Karen parents may need support to find more appropriate ways to raise children in Australia.

Karen Festivals

Karen people in Australia are keen to celebrate their festivals in Australia, and the festivals described in this book are celebrated wherever there are Karen communities.

Gambling, alcohol and other drugs

Some Karen refugees coming to Australia are coming with gambling or alcohol or drug issues. Other Karen refugees, especially young people, are developing drug or alcohol problems after arriving. Gambling is not a problem in some Karen communities in Australia, but a growing problem in others. Some Karen community leaders are reluctant to admit there are problems, and finding culturally appropriate services can be difficult.

Family and sexual violence

Karen refugees come from an environment where there is very little legal protection for women against family and sexual violence, and police are in fact a major perpetrator of sexual violence.

Many Karen women in Australia are unaware that the police in Australia will take action to protect them from violence. A few women in Australia have reported family and sexual violence to the police, and have subsequently been pressured by community leaders to withdraw their complaints. Others in the community have praised these women for their bravery.

Power, authority and hierarchy

Before arriving in Australia the lives of Karen refugees have been controlled by organisations that are not accountable to them, and often authoritarian and corrupt.

Some Karen community leaders try to use the expectations of newly-arrived Karen refugees to create the same authoritarian leadership within their communities.

Most refugees soon learn that the settlement organisations and government agencies that support them after their arrival are not corrupt and are there to help them. However dealing with government agencies is bewildering and complex, and most refugees are hesitant to challenge or even question decisions made by them.

Resources

This list of resources is not exhaustive but is a good starting point for learning more about the Karen people and Burma.

Books

Christensen, R. & Kyaw, S. 2006 **The Pa-O: Rebels and Refugees**, Silkworm, Chiang Mai.

Diran, K 1999 **The vanishing tribes of Burma**, Seven Dials, London.

Lintner, B. 1999 **Burma in revolt: opium and insurgency since 1948**, Silkworm Books, Chiang Mai.

Khoo Thwe, P 2003 **From the land of green ghosts: a Burmese Odyssey**, HarperCollins, London.

Marshall, H, 1997 **The Karen people of Burma: a study in Anthropology and Ethnology**, White Lotus, Bangkok.

Phan, Z. 2009 **Little daughter: a memoir of survival in Burma and the West**, Simon & Schuster, London.

Smith, M. 1999 **Burma: insurgency and the politics of ethnicity**, Zed Books, London.

Internet sites

Karen Human Rights Group – www.khrg.org

Karen Teacher Working Group – www.ktwg.org

Karen Women's Organisation – www.karenwomen.org

Thai-Burma Border Consortium – www.tbtc.org

Drum Publications – www.drumpublications.org

Notes

¹ Some Christian Karen and missionaries like to say that “the Karen are a Christian people”. There is no factual basis for this and more realistic estimates put about 15% of the Karen as Christians. Even the Karen Baptist Convention has stated that more than two thirds of Karen people are Buddhist and Animist. For example see **Burma in revolt: opium and insurgency since 1949** by Bertil Lintner.

² Karen Human Rights Group, **Background on Burma**, http://www.khrg.org/background_on_burma.html downloaded on 21 December 2009.

³ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/page?page=49e489646> downloaded on 21 December 2009

⁴ Names and identifying details of the villages have been changed

⁵ For more detailed information on traditional Karen clothing, see **The Vanishing Tribes of Burma** in the resources section.

⁶ Most Christian Karen share these beliefs, however because many Christian Karen have no contact with Buddhists they are unaware they are shared beliefs. Most Christian Karen share the Buddhist belief in rebirth, believing that Christians are usually “reborn” in heaven.

⁷ DARE Network, <http://www.darenetwork.com/>

⁸ The Thai-Burma Border Consortium includes AusAID, the Australian Government aid agency. See www.tbtc.org for more information.