



Karen Culture Presentation – Frequently Asked Questions

Do Karen in Burma only live in Karen State? No. While the majority of Karen live in Karen State, many live in other regions as well. There are also many Thai-Karen living in Thailand outside of the camps. Karenni live in Kayah State, just North of Karen State in Eastern Burma.

What do many refugees from Burma think about the NCA (Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement)? The Ceasefire was not signed by all ethnic groups. Different groups, even within the Karen population, have different views of the NCA. Some support it and see it as a positive step and others are still wary to trust the government of Burma.

Which is the largest Karen refugee camp in Thailand? Mae La refugee camp near Mae Sot, Thailand.

Are the refugee camps in Thailand going to close soon? The Thai and Burmese governments want to close the camps soon, and the UNHCR sees the NCA and other peace efforts as a sign that refugees can go back. However, there is not much to go back to. Preparations are not being made to secure them land, homes, employment and other services if they were to return. Many landmines remain.

Why do some Karen families have last names and some don't? Traditionally, Karen families would not have a last name (or family name), but sometimes, when they migrate to the US or become citizens, they may choose a last name for the family to make legal documents easier.

Which celebration days can I attend, even if I'm not Karen? You are welcome to all of them! Karen Martyr's Day in August and Karen New Year in December or January are both very large events that include performances and sports tournaments. The Karen Wrist Tying Ceremony is not religious, so anyone is welcome to have their wrist tied no matter their religion, it is a calling back of one's spirit (if you have been wandering or feeling lost).

What are the challenges of multi-generational housing in the US? When families first arrive, they are placed in small apartments that do not always accommodate the whole family. Many families stay in these apartments for years. They can become cramped and it may take a while to get public housing, as the waiting lists get very long. Tiny houses would not be a good solution for housing in the Karen community, because they would prefer to have larger spaces to fit more family members. When Karen families buy homes, they prefer to live with or near family.

Is Karen culture matriarchal? Some say that Karen culture is matriarchal, but it varies by family. There are both patriarchal and matriarchal tendencies in Karen culture. However, women may also be in charge of the household finances, both women and men may work, and both parents make family decisions together. In some households, only the men work, and the women take care of the children. It depends on the education and capability of each parent.

What is the average level of education received by students in the refugee camps? It varies by student and family. Some students may have gone to school consistently and finished high school in the camps. They may move to a bigger camp to access more education. Also, some students may only go to school up to grade 2 or 3 and then stay home to help their family. Some students may also have gaps in their education, from going to school and then stopping for a period of time and starting up again later.



Why is there a large Karen Christian population in the US? Christians are more likely to be persecuted in Burma and less likely to be offered compromises with the government of Burma. However, many Karen are persecuted no matter their religion, and large amounts of Karen in the U.S. are also Buddhist.

How do the Karen cook in the US? Mostly on the stove and by using a rice cooker. Most Karen will not bake, but will use the oven to keep food warm. Many also don't have dishwashers, so dishes will be washed by hand.

What is fish paste? Fish paste is dried, salted and then fermented fish. It is usually made to be spicy and is eaten with rice and vegetables.

Do the Karen have experience with Western health care? Karen who lived in refugee camps may have experience with Western health care from the camp clinics sponsored by NGOs if they or a family member had been sick. However, their resources are very limited. If it is very serious, they might be sent to Thai hospitals. There is limited experience with mental health care and a lack of mental health terms in the Karen languages.

Why do the Karen experience intergenerational conflict in the US? Youth and children often adapt to American culture and understand how to navigate the American system faster than their parents. Because of this, children and youth may be asked to translate for their parents, or to read important mail. This may shift the household authority, where the parents may feel like they have less power and control over their children. Parental discipline is also different in the US, and while some parents may have spanked their kids in Burma or Thailand when they misbehaved, they fear that if they spank their kids in the US, they will face legal consequences. This may cause them to feel powerless, and sometimes children may take advantage of their parents' inability to discipline them.

Since it is not polite to use communication with actions, what should I do as a teacher or presenter? In general, it is impolite to point at someone, call to them by pointing or gesture to them to come by pointing a hand, finger or foot. Calling with your palm facing up and curling your fingers is how animals would be called, so do not do this to a person. If you face your palm down and slightly scoop the air downwards towards your body, it is okay to call someone that way.

Is a student not listening to me when they look down while I'm talking to them? Eye contact with an elder is considered disrespectful, so if a student is looking down or avoiding eye contact while you are speaking with them, it may just be a sign of respect, not of disobedience.