



Karen Organization
of San Diego

Fact Sheet: Understanding the Karen in San Diego

Karen Culture:

- The Karen are an ethnic minority group from Burma. They speak their own language, also called Karen, and have their own culture and traditions.
- Karen is pronounced *Kuh-ren*, not like the American name.
- Karen are Christian, Buddhist, and Animist. Many Karen settled in San Diego are Christian and are very active in local churches.
- Family is very important in Karen culture. Family members often pull resources to support one another. Children often live at home until marriage.
- Karen consider other Karen to be like brothers and sisters and they care about one another like family.
- Many Karen come from agricultural backgrounds.

Karen Community Member Names:

Karen are traditionally given one name at birth. There are no last or family names in Burma. When refugees arrive in the USA, their names are broken up by syllable with the final part serving as the last name. For this reason, Karen who are related do not share a last name. Karen community members might have these parts of names:

Lar	Klo	May	Shee
Paw	Wah	Saw	Sher
Eh	Gay	Htee	Kaw
Moo	Lah	Dah	Taw
Thaw	Hser	Lay	Blut
Htoo	Khu	Maung	Hsa
Mu	Shee	Kyaw	Win
Pleh	Kyi	Ku	Ta

Karen Food:

- Karen eat rice for every meal.
- Rice is accompanied by several smaller dishes including curries, vegetables, and shrimp paste. Food is most often shared 'family style'.
- Karen food is VERY spicy and also has savory, sour and bitter flavor profiles.
- Food is often used as traditional medicine and Karen are able to describe the medicinal properties of some foods.



Karen Clothing:



Traditional weaving is a part of Karen culture. Karen traditional clothing consists of beautiful hand-woven shirts, and woven skirts made of a single piece of fabric wrapped around the body. Both men and women can wear the traditional shirts and skirts. Sometimes women wear long woven dresses with tassels hanging from them. Karen wear a face paint that is both cosmetic and sunscreen. Many Karen in San Diego wear western clothing.



Why are the Karen here as refugees?

There is a very long running conflict between the Karen and the Burmese government. The Karen have always been persecuted by the Burmese majority. Their villages have been attacked and residents have at times been forced to hide out in the jungle. Karen refugees have sometimes been tortured, forced to be porters by the army, have had their villages burnt down, or even have had family members killed by government forces. Karen refugees escape from Burma to refugee camps in Thailand. Many of the younger Karen were born in Thai refugee camps where there are few resources or opportunities. Many Karen have experienced severe trauma before their arrival in the USA. Like all refugees, PTSD is a common problem resulting from the trauma that they have endured.

Why do Karen resettle in San Diego?

San Diego is a refugee resettlement hub with organizations like the International Rescue Committee, Jewish Family Services, the Alliance for African Assistance, and Catholic Charities resettling refugees from camps around the world. Many Karen would like to live here since there is a strong existing network of Karen. The climate in California is also more similar to that of Burma than the climate in other states.

Why is it hard for Karen to adjust to life in San Diego?

Would you be able to survive in a jungle?

Probably not. But many Karen could.

Life in Burma and in refugee camps in Thailand is very different than life in the United States. Just as it would be VERY difficult for us to adjust to life as an internally displaced person in Burma, having to survive in the jungle, it is hard for Karen to adjust to urban life. Some Karen have said that when they arrive, they don't even know how to work the key in the front door. Their traditional bamboo thatch houses don't use a lock and key.

Refugees from Burma have to learn to navigate all parts of life in the USA, including learning about the public safety system, welfare procedures, public transportation, the healthcare system, the education system, and so much more. This is made much more difficult since many Karen have never been taught English and are unable to speak or understand the language. To compound the problem, many adults arriving have never had the opportunity to go to school and are often illiterate even in their own language. This does not make them stupid. They just haven't been exposed to the same educational system that most Americans have. Karen are resourceful and hardworking and are trying their best to adapt to life in San Diego. Karen are also very good at uniting the community and supporting one another which will help them as they adjust to life in the United States.

What are some cultural differences that could cause problems for Karen adjusting to life in the United States?

- Karen are often very distrustful and fearful of uniformed officials. There is good reason for this. In Burma, uniformed government officials may stop someone and throw them in jail without any due process. Uniformed officials in Burma stop Karen and sometimes force them into labor, making them lead the way through land mines and carry impossible loads. Some Karen have been tortured by police in their home country. These experiences have made the Karen fearful of uniformed officers. It will take time to gain their trust and help them to understand that police in the United States are here to help people, not hurt them.
- Many Karen parents do not understand the dangers of letting their children wander around the City Heights neighborhood without supervision. In refugee camps, children were often able to play outside unsupervised because all adults in the community would watch out for them.
- In Burma and in refugee camps, teachers usually implement harsh discipline including corporal punishment. Karen sometimes do not understand the American education system and the fact that parents are responsible for discipline.
- Karen sometimes find American ideals of individualism and competition as well as American sexual attitudes to be quite shocking. In their society, cooperation and harmony are most important. Karen culture is very modest and is sexually conservative in comparison to American culture.
- For many Karen, living in an apartment and paying bills is something very new. It is not uncommon for a family to share one room in an apartment.
- Cigarettes and alcohol are sometimes seen as a sign of status in refugee camps in Thailand. Being able to afford these items is a sign of wealth. In the USA where alcohol is readily available and affordable, some Karen men may drink too much and not know their limits. They have also not been exposed to public safety campaigns around drinking and driving as many Americans have.
- Some Karen chew betel nut mixtures which include tobacco and other ingredients. The juice makes blood colored stains on one's teeth and the juice is spit out which Americans find to be unsanitary.

Want to learn more about Karen culture???

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