Karen-Burmese Refugees

An orientation for health workers and volunteers

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Background Information

- The Karen-Burmese live in mountainous jungle regions of Myanmar (southern and eastern), and Thailand

- Myanmar is located in South-East Asia
  - Formally known as Burma
  - Developing and largely rural
  - Bordered by China, Tibet, Laos, Thailand, Bangladesh and India

Source: cyberschoolbus.un.org
Myanmar - Background Information


- Population: 50 519 000

- Life expectancy at birth:
  - 61 years

- Infant mortality rate
  - Per 1000 live births: 106
  - 4.7 / 1000 in Australia
    (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2006)

- Language: Burmese
  - Indigenous peoples have their own languages
  - Over 126 dialects

Flag of Myanmar

Source: cyberschoolbus.un.org
History of Myanmar

• 1886: Became a province of British India
• 1948: Gained independence
• 1962: Military dictatorship took power
  – Large outflow of refugees
• 1988: Martial law declared
  – Increased refugee numbers
• State of civil war for much of the past 50 years
Ethnic Groups

- Major ethnic group: Burmese
- Largest indigenous population: Karen
- Other indigenous races include:
  - Shans
  - Chins
  - Mon
  - Rakhine
  - Katchin
- Ethnic tension between Burman majority and minority ethnic groups
Burmese children in refugee camp

Photograph by Tom Riddle
Source: www.tbcc.org
Introduction to the Karens

• Population: 6 million (Myanmar)  
  400 000 (Thailand)

• Language: Tibeto-Burman family  
  – 12 different dialects  
  – Over 80% speak either Saga or Pwo

• Religion: Christianity, Buddhism, Muslim, animism
Karen Culture

• Pride themselves on their:
  – Moral and ‘simple, quiet, unassuming and peace loving’ nature
  – Vibrant clothing
  – Dance
  – Music

Photographs by Tom Riddle
Source: www.tbhc.org
Karen Culture

• Religion
  – Traditional animist - spirit worshipping belief systems
    • *Ther myng khae* (guardian spirits), ‘lord of land and water’, local spirits, beneficial and malicious ghosts
    • Make sacrifices to natural forces
    • Often incorporated into understanding of organised religion
  – Christian (65%)
    • Emphasis on Bible study and prayer services (hymn singing)
    • Skin adorned with tattoos for magical protection
    • Martyr day – fast for half to full day
    • Some do not drink tea or eat pork on day of worship (Saturday)
Karen Culture

• Religion
  – Buddhist (28%)
    • Considerable interplay with animist rituals/practices
    • Often wear amulets
    • Do not drink alcohol
  – Muslim (11%)
    • Worship to Allah contributes to both spiritual and worldly well-being to:
      – Enrich and develop the soul
      – Prepare for the life to come
    • Abstain from eating certain foods including:
      – Pork and its by-products
      – Flesh of animals which have died without being ritually slaughtered (Halal meat products are consumed)
Burmese Health Beliefs

• Health is related to harmony in and between the body, mind, soul and universe
  – Harmony expressed as a balance between ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ elements (not necessarily related to temperature)
  – States of health seen as ‘hot’ or ‘cold’ – treatment with the opposite medicine or foods

• Postpartum period is time of susceptibility to illness – mother’s body ‘cold’ from blood loss
  – Body should be warmed with external heat and warm drinks as well as foods with ‘hot’ properties
  – Sour and bitter foods eaten also thought to reduce blood flow
Traditional Karen Culture

• Family life
  – Women traditionally considered inferior to men. However this has been changing
  – Average of 2 – 3 children per family

• Marriage
  – Whole village consulted as to whether a marriage is appropriate and not offensive to any spirits
  – Adultery is considered taboo - an unnatural act that can bring catastrophe on the whole village
Traditional Karen Culture

• Relationships
  – ‘a-nah-dah’ expresses Burmese cultural value – “an attitude of delicacy, expressive of a solicitousness for other people’s feelings or convenience”
  – Very hospitable and will expect any guests to eat with them

• Polite greeting
  – Holding your right elbow in your left hand, and using your right hand to shake hands
  – Shoes not worn in home