



The Milwaukee Burmese¹

History in Milwaukee

Due to internal unrest in Burma (the Republic of Myanmar), Burmese populations have arrived in the United States in three waves—one in the 1960s, one following an uprising in 1988, and one after 2006. Between 2006 and 2015, more than 60,000 Burmese were resettled in the United States. This was mainly due to ethnic conflicts and a series of economic and political protests and demonstrations that took place in 2007. A few Burmese also resettled following the devastating effects of Hurricane Nargis in 2008 that resulted in an estimated 200,000 people dead or missing. Survivors of these events went to refugee camps in Malaysia or along Indian, Bangladeshi, and Thai borders. Some were allowed entry to the United States.

Most of the Milwaukee Burmese have arrived in this last wave. As of 2015 there were an estimated 1,500 Burmese people living in the greater Milwaukee area.

The immigrants

Most of the Burmese who arrived in the United States were refugees. Under U.S. law, refugees and asylees are aliens who are unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin or nationality because of persecution or well-founded fears of persecution. Much of the persecution the Burmese refugees experienced in Burma was prompted by their ethnic and religious affiliations. While there are at least 108 different ethnolinguistic groups in Burma, the Bamar (also called Burman) ethnic group comprises over two-thirds of the national population and has dominated the political and cultural environment since the British left the country in 1948—a process often described by insiders and outsiders as the “Burmanization” of Burma. Ethnic persecution, including killings, rape, and forced labor, has been well-documented.

In addition to ethnic discrimination, there has also been religious discrimination in Burma. Between 85 and 89 percent of the population of Burma practices Buddhism, mostly Theravada Buddhism. Seven percent of the population practices Christianity, 4 percent Islam, 2 percent Hinduism, and approximately 2 percent other faiths. Muslims and Christians have experienced persecution because of their religions.

“There are so many different ethnic groups in Burma. There are detailed differences. From the surface it’s similar, a lot of the foods are similar, the dancing and singing are different, and literature is very different. Languages are different.”

“Even ‘til today, the Burmese are still using our language and some cultural practices and religions of Mon life ways and past beliefs. People ask me where I am from and they assume that I am Burmese, when I am not. I am Mon.”

“In Milwaukee they know the Burmese cultural differences about us, like the difference between the Mon and Chin and Karen communities. Most people don’t.”

“Here we can be a different ethnic group and that can be okay, but back there you can be killed just because of the group you were born in.”

Quotes of Burmese informants from the 12-year Milwaukee ethnic study conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.

¹ While Americans tend to group all people from Myanmar together as “Burmese,” this population is comprised of a large number of distinct ethnic groups, and most individuals identify with their ethnic group as opposed to their national origin.

Some of the worst examples of human rights abuses have occurred among the Muslim Burmese—particularly the Rohingya people. Many Muslim Burmese spent decades moving back and forth between Burma and Malaysia. The Burmese regime has refused to acknowledge them as citizens. As of 2015, more than 100,000 Rohingyas of Burma live in camps for internally displaced persons. Many of these have made their way to America and to the Milwaukee area. Many who had settled in Malaysia have also resettled in America and the Milwaukee area.

Also included among the Milwaukee Burmese population are members of the Karen ethnic group, who practice Christianity or Buddhism, and the Chin ethnic group, whose members are mainly Christians. Other smaller groups in Milwaukee include Karenni, Shan, and Burman/Bamar populations—most who practice Theravada Buddhism, Christianity, or traditional local religions.

Keeping the culture in Milwaukee

Like the Milwaukee Hmong, the Burmese want to adapt to American norms but not lose their own cultural traditions. Currently, many refugees are being assisted in adaptation to America by the International Learning Center of Neighborhood House, the Burmese Immigration Project, Pan-African Community Association, the International Institute of Wisconsin, International Language Center and Tutoring, Lutheran Social Services, Catholic Charities, coalitions of landlords, and Ascension Lutheran Church. Many refugees have been able to remain in their extended family



groups by renting apartments in the same complex—some of these, such as the Rohingya /Burmese Muslims and Chin are on Milwaukee's south side. The Karen refugees have tended to settle on the north side near Washington Park.

The refugees have retained most of their Burmese diets and food restrictions, made possible in part by opening Burmese stores in Milwaukee. Most Burmese prefer rice and spicy curry dishes with vegetables and meats.

"[In Milwaukee, we work at] factories (plastic and meat), cargo meats, and packaging companies. Like my sister (they have a sushi business), or having your own business, like grocery stores and markets."

"I mean, a lot of families came as refugee status so they are approved for health-care, but there are still some cultural healing remedies, like we have that our own herbal medicines that we use when our stomach is sick or headaches."

"[Our biggest challenge] is the languages barriers and adapting new cultures. Even the legal system, it is difficult. Getting used to the changes of seasons."

"You don't date people openly, and since you don't really date people outside of your own culture, then you don't see them often enough to get to know them. You don't move out until you get married. . . I think that here in Milwaukee you Americans would go out on weekend days and people would go out to bars, but our culture—it's not open or maybe there are language barriers that make this hard, and stop us from going out and being more social with others. The Burmese refugees [Chin, Karen] would say that since the community is very small, and if a girl would go out a lot on her own, this is not looked good on or respected as much."

Quotes of Burmese informants from the 12-year Milwaukee ethnic study conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.

They have also organized faith communities to help them retain their culture and meet their spiritual needs. The Chin and Kachin have their own churches, and the Buddhists and Muslims have their own temple and mosque.

The Burmese people have also retained their interpersonal customs. They are especially polite and show vigilant respect for elders and mentors. To acknowledge this deference, they use different linguistic terms for men and women by age relative to their own age. Many Burmese continue to retain the conservative customs they practiced in their homeland. The customs vary by ethnic group.

The Burmese have developed practices in Milwaukee to remember their persecution in Burma. One of these practices, observed by a few, is memorializing the “8888 uprising” which occurred August 8, 1988. On that day in 1988, peaceful demonstrations for democracy began spreading across the country, ending with a military coup and the slaughter of thousands of protesters by the military-led government and thousands more fleeing to refugee camps. In Milwaukee, some Burmese still honor this event on its anniversary. On the day, they gather together, pray for those who lost their lives in the uprising, and talk about a dream of a Burma free from military rule.

Other observances include Mon National Day and Chin National Day. The Karen practice an annual spiritual day with a bracelet-tying ceremony. A water/new year ceremony also draws a large number of people in April. The Rohingya and Burmese Muslims observe Muslim holidays.

Where to observe Burmese culture

World Refugee Day is a good place to observe Burmese culture. The Day was established by the United Nations to honor the courage, strength, and determination of those who have been forced to flee their homes under threat of conflict.

“Like Mon in the U.S., we try wherever we can to keep our literature and language alive, and our traditions alive, we try our best like my grandmother with my little niece, to teach old values and practices to keep it going.”

Quotes of Burmese informants from the 12-year Milwaukee ethnic study conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.



In Milwaukee County, the day is usually held in June at one or more local parks. The Burmese are strong participants, as are Hmong, East Africans, Eastern Europeans, Latin Americans, and other cultural groups. People usually bring their own picnic lunches while they watch or participate in cultural performances and games, such as soccer. You will see people outfitted in their traditional dress, practicing their indigenous customs, and eating traditional foods.

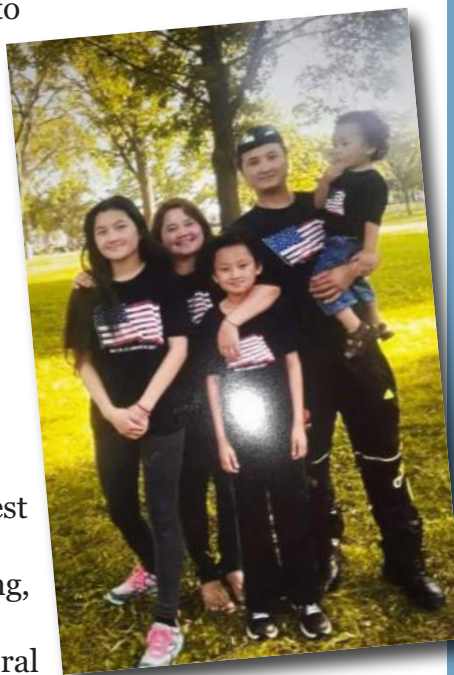
Meet one of your current neighbors from Burma/Myanmar


Htee Sher Paw

Htee Sher Paw is a refugee from Myanmar and a member of the Karen ethnic group. In her nuclear family, only her youngest son was born in the United States. The family (see photo to the right) came to America from a Thai refugee camp, where they lived for a decade. Her extended family—also refugees—is scattered throughout the planet, including a brother-in-law in New York; two parents, eight siblings, two sisters-in-law, and a mother-in-law in Australia; and a brother and brother-in-law still behind in a Thai camp.

Today an American citizen, Htee Sher Paw learned English and currently works as a bilingual support specialist at Neighborhood House on Milwaukee's West Side. While she enjoys many universal pastimes such as camping, flower gardening, "scary" movies, and fishing, she is also resolute in retaining her own Karen cultural traditions. She cooks Karen food, attends Karen church services, participates in holiday celebrations, and sings in a Karen choir. When asked what she is most proud of, she responded: "Emigrating from a Thai refugee camp where I lived for 10 years after escaping Burma, arriving in the U.S., learning English, buying a home, and becoming a U.S. citizen."

Htee Sher Paw also has a wish list. "The negative aspects of my family being scattered around the world, due to refugee resettlement, are that all family do not get to greet their newborn family members





nor celebrate holidays together. It is very costly to visit those in far-away places, and we may not be with our family members when they pass on. The positive aspect is that we get to travel the world, when we can afford it, to visit family members.

“There are a variety of Karen community groups with different religions, languages and practices that live in Milwaukee. They often function independently from one another. My wish is that on occasion, all groups would come together as a family.”