

SAY WAH HTOO

Reynolds student **Say Wah Htoo** was born in Thailand but is a member of the Burmese Karen community. More than 140,000 Burmese Karen refugees fled to Thailand to escape war and human rights abuses. About 15% of the Karen are Christian, as is Say Wah. The Karen people are known for smiling a lot. The Karen culture is very musical; almost everybody sings or plays a musical instrument. The dress that you see in the picture behind Say Wah is hand-made and would be worn by unmarried females. Unmarried Karen women wear a long white dress and married Karen women wear a sarong and sleeveless shirt. The bag is also hand-made; it could be used by men or women.



WHAT'S IN A NAME?

IS IT BURMA OR MYANMAR?

Did you know that **Richmond** is home to many Burmese-born? The most recent refugee resettlement report from 2013 shows that Burmese-born represented the 5th largest group of refugees in Virginia, after Iraq, Bhutan, Ethiopia and Afghanistan. Reynolds Community College is home to a growing number of Burmese-born refugees.

Myanmar (still referred to as Burma by many) is located in Southeast Asia and is roughly the size of the state of Texas. An estimated 68 percent of the population belongs to the Burmese ethnic group, also known as **Burman** or **Bamar**. Smaller ethnic groups include the **Shan**, **Kayin** (or **Karen**), **Rakhine** and **Mon**, but there are also more than one hundred smaller groups. The majority of the population lives in rural areas. The official language of the country is Burmese, but more than 100 local languages and dialects are spoken throughout the country. Burmese is a tonal language, which means that a given syllable can have different meanings depending on which of three tones, or pitches, is used. An estimated 89 percent of the population is Theravada Buddhist. Many Buddhist practice **nat** (spirit) worship and shrines to spirits are common, especially in rural areas. Christians (predominantly Baptist and Catholic) make up about 4 percent of the population, and Muslims make up 4 percent.

In Myanmar, a person's life is generally categorized into three phases or steps, with respective duties and obligations. Children are responsible for pursuing education. Adults are expected to earn a living and marry. The elderly have religious duties – practicing meditation, keeping the Sabbath, and performing acts of charity. The attribute **ah-nar-deh**, "having consideration for others," is often described as a national characteristic. This attribute describes the reluctance to bring about a loss of face or to cause trouble or inconvenience.



Burmese Humphrey Scholar leads College book discussion of *Smile as they Bow*

In February, the Around the World through Books sub-committee of the Multicultural Enrichment Council hosted a program on the book *Smile as they Bow* by Myanmar novelist Nu Nu Yi. The book provides a fascinating glimpse into the life of a gay, transvestite spirit medium caught up in a midlife crisis amid the currents of an annual summer Buddhist festival.

Among her other accomplishments, the author has scripted Burmese language radio plays to promote HIV/AIDS awareness, so it was only fitting that the book discussion program featured **VCU Humphrey Scholar Yu Yu Aung**, who discussed her own AIDS research as well as attitudes towards homosexuality in Myanmar.



CULTURE AND TRADITION

Dress ~ Even though Western dress is common, many Myanmar still wear traditional clothing, especially in rural areas. Men wear an **eingyi**, a short-collared shirt, **taikpon**, a round-necked jacket, and **longyi**, an ankle-length wraparound sarong. Burmese women wear a blouse with a **longyi**. Material patterns for the **longyi** differ for men and women. Sometimes women wear a **pawa**, a long shawl worn over the shoulders. Traditional dress for other ethnic groups usually consists of sarongs or pants (for some non-Burmese men). Both men and women wear flip-flops or sandals. Farmers may wear a conical bamboo hat called a **khamauk** and go barefoot. While women often wear white **thanaka** paste on their faces (made from the bark of the **thanaka** tree), some urban women have stopped wearing the paste in public because they don't want to look like rural villagers.

Greetings ~ The traditional Myanmar greeting is to bow slightly while holding one's hands overlapping in front of the stomach. A younger person greets first with a bow; an elder person typically responds with just a nod. While common greetings include **Min-gala-ba** (a formal "Hello"), you may also hear **Wa-lo hla-lo** (You are looking more plump and more beautiful.) Myanmar regard moderate plumpness as a sign of health.

Names ~ Names consist of between one and four syllables, each of which is also an ordinary word. Names traditionally start with letters corresponding to the day of the week a person is born. There is no tradition of surnames in Myanmar although many urban parents now use part of the father's name as a suffix to the child's. Honorifics change with age. **Ma** (Sister) is used to address girls and young women, while older women are addressed with **Daw** (Aunt). The male honorifics are **Maung** (Younger brother) for boys, **Ko** (Big brother) for young men, and **U** (uncle) for older men. Take the male name **Kyaw** as an example. He would be called **Maung Kyaw** as a child, **Ko Kyaw** as a young man, and finally, **U Kyaw** as an older man.



Practices & Customs ~ Shoes and socks are never allowed on the platform of a pagoda or inside a monastery and are rarely worn in the home. It is common to sit on the floor, with men generally sitting cross-legged and women kneeling. Hospitality is important and friends and neighbors generally drop by for a short visit without prior arrangement.

Family ~ Myanmar tend to live in extended family arrangements, especially those in rural areas. Children usually live with their parents until after they graduate from a university or until they get married. Adult children are expected to take care of their elderly parents at home. The father is the main breadwinner and, in most cases, is expected to give his income to the mother, who runs the household. Buddhism's influence on Myanmar has led to greater gender equality. Buddhism also teaches that the achievement of enlightenment is not dependent on gender, race, caste, or socioeconomic status. While motherhood is valued in Myanmar society, a growing number of women also work outside the home. You will find that many of Myanmar's university professors are women.

Food ~ varies by region, but the one constant is rice, which is always eaten at lunch and dinner. It is usually served with a curry dish of fish, chicken, or shrimp, along with fried vegetables and soup. Some ethnic groups eat more noodles than rice.

Sources: CultureGrams World Edition 2015, Republic of the Union of Myanmar and www.oxfordburmaalliance.org

ESL Program Staff:
Laurie Weinberg (coordinator)
Marty Watkin (faculty)
Jinky Ebarle Davis (advisor)
Chris Early (work study)