

## Cultural tips and trends

Below are some cultural tips and trends for the Karen people. Of course this generalizes a group of individuals so there will be exceptions. Also, the Karen are learning and adjusting to American life and may be adopting American manners and customs. So this list should be used as a guideline until one is able to get to know each person individually. Further, these points are not meant to be positive or negative, but just the way the culture is as best we know. There are positive and negative aspects to any cultural trait depending on the situation.

- Karens do not come straight to the point even when discussing important matters or problems. Many other subjects might be discussed first. An American might see a short, quick business meeting as highly efficient while the Karen might find it rushed or even rude.
- Decisions are usually by consensus. Votes might be taken, but only after there has been enough discussion to see which way people are leaning and the result is pretty much known. It would be unusual to have dissenting votes.
- Karens avoid confrontation, which is really the root of the two items above. Problems are often heard about through a third party. Two people involved in a serious problem do not talk it out together. An intermediary might be used, or a group meeting.
- Losing one's temper in front of the Karen is a serious matter to be avoided at all costs. Don't pound the table with your fist or shake your finger at someone. A loss of control means a loss of the respect of the community.
- There are no secrets in village life and a village mentality is likely to have transferred to the US. Expect anything anyone does or says to be known and discussed by the group at some point.
- When a Karen says "I have no money" it generally means "I have no money for this purpose" or more simply, "I don't wish to spend any money on that" - a polite way of saying "I don't want it".
- " Sharing and hospitality in the tribal culture are reciprocal. Accept gifts graciously. Find thoughtful ways to share and extend hospitality.
- Assume you need to take your shoes off entering a Karen home. It would be mandatory in their original homes in Burma or Thailand. However, some seem to accept shoes in the home here in the US fairly quickly. If you see Karen in the house with shoes on, then it is probably OK to leave yours on as well.
- Don't step over anything or anybody.
- Karens do not pass things over another person sitting on the floor, including any part of their body.
- Karens avoid walking in front of another person even in meetings and homes. In the rare case when a person must walk in front, the head is lowered and the right hand is extended to make a 'path' and you say excuse me.
- An extension of the point above, do not walk in between two people talking or through the middle of a group sitting or standing. To do so means you have walked in front of the faces of everyone.
- Give things with the right hand.

- Keep the hug impulse on hold. The Karen aren't huggers. Male to female physical contact especially is rare outside the home. However, woman to woman, or man to man, arms around the shoulders or grasping the hand is OK and even welcomed in the right situation. Handshakes are also OK, even between male and female.
- The Karen don't engage in public displays of affection. It is often difficult or impossible to tell who is romantically involved with who or even who is married to who just by looking. Even in weddings, don't ask the bride to kiss the groom at the end of the ceremony. Even locking arms going down the aisle is the cause of red faces for the bride and groom and even more so for the attendants.
- Karen don't like talking about themselves even to the point of not really wanting to say their name. In Thailand and Burma, if at all possible, rather than ask someone directly what their name is, if someone else is there, they would ask that person. At Karen meetings, if people are introduced, usually one person introduces the rest. Names are sometimes rather grandiose, so to say one's own name might seem like they are bragging. Karen will tell you their name if asked, but you might also notice that others around them are giggling and a little embarrassed.
- Karen are more conscious of people as opposed to time. Making and sticking to strict schedules is a difficult adjustment for many. We might see rushing from one appointment to the next as efficient, while they might see it as being rude to the person who is being left behind.
- Related to the point above, making long range plans and setting goals is a rather new concept for most. As a rule, the Karen will take life as it happens to them.
- Do not refer to the Karen as Burmese. Ethnically, they are a completely different group and many will not even speak Burmese. The Karen have come from the country of Burma, but not by choice and it is the Burmese that have driven them from their home. So many Karen will not identify with the Burmese in a very positive way. Of course the political stance of the Karen will vary with their experience, but still, unless the person corrects you, it is much better to refer to people by their ethnic group (Karen, Chin, Kachin, Shan, Karenni, etc.) rather than call them Burmese.