

1. Description

1.1 Name of society, language, and language family

Society: Pa'o (1)

Language: Karen, Pa'o (1)

Alternate names: Black Karen, Northern Taungthu, Pa Oh, Pa-O, Pa-U (1)

Language family: Karenic (1)

1.2 ISO code (3 letter code from ethnologue.com): blk (1)

1.3 Location (latitude/longitude): Myanmar, also in Thailand (1)

Location within Country:

“The large majority inhabits the south-western part of Shan State in Myanmar. The geographical centre of the Pa-O (Black Karen) could be considered the mountains around the towns of Taunggyi and Kalaw. An additional 900 Pa-O live inside Thailand, inhabiting four villages within the Muang District of Mae Hong Son Province” (2).

1.4 Brief history:

The Karen are one of the ethnic groups in the region of Burma/Myanmar. Karenic can be divided into four language groups: Sgwa, “Central Karenic,” Pwo and Pa'o. There are many ethnic groups in the area of Burma/Myanmar, but, “While each ethnic group is different, they have one thing in common – they have all been oppressed by the military junta in Burma” (5). Tensions between the Burmans and Karen have always been present, but during WWII, the tension intensified, and the Karen aligned with the British (5).

After the world war, the British were negotiating independence but ignored the Karen when they advocated for independence from the Burma and wanted their own land. For a short time after independence, the Karen and the Burma majority lived peacefully. This did not last long, and the Karen National Defense Organization (KNDO) fought to protect their communities (5).

The Southern Shan states were inhabited by the Karen subgroup, the Pa'o (3). The Pa'o are part of the Karen groups, but many Pa'o do not even know this, and instead consider themselves a unique group. Although little is known about the early history of the Karen, according to the Pa'o, their ancestors, “fled north to Shan State from the Mon City of Thaton, in Lower Burma, after the overthrow of the Mon King Manuha in the eleventh century by King Anawratha of Pagan” (2). Although they are related to the Karen, they adopted Buddhism from the Shan (3). The Pa'o are also called the Taungthu by the Burmese, which means, “Hill People” (2). The British colonists called them Black Karen because at the time the women wore black or dark blue dresses (2).

1.5 Influence of missionaries/schools/governments/powerful neighbors:

Missionaries: The arrival of missionaries to the Karen resulted in social, cultural, economic and educational transformation.

Missionaries first translated scripture portions into Pa-o in 1912 (2). The conversion of some Karen to Christianity occurred during the early to mid 18th century when Christian missionaries began settling in rural areas of Burma (6). Converts learned to read and write in English and Burmese (6).

Government: The Karen were living in Southern Burma when the Burman invaders arrived and they suffered more than any other group (3). The Karen who lived under direct Burman rule were forced to provide labor for the new Burman invaders, and heavy taxes were imposed on them (3). Many of them fled Burma due to religious and ethnic persecution by the government (4).

1.6 Ecology: nothing on the ecology was found

1.7 Population size, mean village size, home range size, density:

Population in Myanmar is 560,000; in all countries, the total is 560,740 (1). The large majority of Pa'o live in the southwestern part of Shan State in Myanmar (2). The geographical centre of the Pa'o could be considered the mountains around the towns of Taunggyi and Kalaw (2). Additional Pa-O live inside of Thailand (2).

2. Economy

2.1 Main carbohydrate staple(s):

rice and vegetables including cucumbers, squash, bamboo shoots, eggplants, mushrooms from the forest and edible wild vegetables (5)

2.2 Main protein-lipid sources:

chickens, pigs and cows and if fishing is an option they eat fish (5)

2.3 Weapons: Bow and arrow, blowguns?:

Although the Karen, Pa'o have engaged in previous warfare, nothing on their weaponry was found.

2.4 Food storage: not found

2.5 Sexual division of production:

Agriculture is the center of the Karen economy (4). Men will work in the fields and the women do the housework such as cleaning, cooking, collecting the water and gathering firewood as well as working in the fields (5).

2.6 Land tenure:

The Karen people are very skilled farmers, and both men and women work in the fields (5). Their crops include rice, vegetables, corn, sesame and chilies (5).

2.7 Ceramics: not found

2.8 Specified (prescribed or proscribed) sharing patterns: not found

2.9 Food taboos:

“There are many food taboos that exist in traditional Karen culture, especially in regards to illness. For example, people who have hepatitis are told to avoid yellow foods and papaya is thought to trigger malaria. It is important to address dietary concerns with patients when an illness is diagnosed” (5). When a woman gets pregnant, she should not eat some traditional spicy foods (5).

2.10 Canoes/watercraft?: none found

3. Anthropometry

3.1 Mean adult height (m and f):

The Karen are of medium height; on the plains the men are about five feet, 4 inches, while in the hills they are about three inches shorter. The women are smaller than the men (7).

3.2 Mean adult weight (m and f): not found

4. Life History, mating, marriage

4.1 Age at menarche (f): not found

4.2 Age at first birth (m and f): not found

4.3 Completed family size (m and f):

A Karen couple may want to have many babies, but infant mortality rate is high in Burma (5). Karen couples tend to have on average two to three children (6).

4.4 Inter-birth-interval (f): not found

4.5 Age first marriage (m and f):

Both sexes marry in their 20's (5).

4.6 Proportion of marriages ending in divorce:

Divorce is rare, but if the couple is divorced, the children will stay with the mother (5).

4.7 Percent marriages polygynous, percent males married polygynously:

Strict monogamy is expected (4). Pregnancy outside of marriage is frowned upon (5).

4.8 Bride purchase (price), bride service, dowry?: none found

4.9 Inheritance patterns:

Karen trace their lineage through the female line (4).

4.10 Parent-offspring interactions and conflict:

The Karen are used to their children being able to run through villages and refugee camps safely, and the Karen people watch each other's children (5). “It truly takes a village to raise a Karen child” (5).

4.11 Homosexual activities, social attitudes towards homosexuals: not found

4.12 Pattern of exogamy (endogamy):

Marriages are generally within their cultural group (6).

4.13 What is the belief of the role of males in conception; is paternity partible? Are these “other fathers” recognized?: not found

4.14 What is the belief of the mother's role in procreation exactly? (e.g., “receptacle in which fetus grows”): not found

4.15 Is conception believed to be an incremental process (i.e., semen builds up over time)?: not found

4.16 Occurrence of sexual coercion, rape?: not found

4.17 Preferential category for spouse (e.g., cross cousin)?:

Men and women are generally free to choose their own marriage partners (4).

4.18 Do females enjoy sexual freedoms?: not found

4.19 Evidence of giving gifts to extramarital partners or extramarital offspring:

Strict monogamy is expected (4).

4.20 If mother dies, whose raises children?:

Men assist with the raising of children (4).

4.21 Adult sex ratio: number of adult males divided by number of (reproductive) females: not found

4.22 Evidence for couvades: not found

4.23 Different distinctions for potential fathers (e.g., lesser/younger vs. major/older):

Both men and women tend to marry in their twenties, but the man tends to be older.

4.24 Kin avoidance and respect?: not found

4.24 Joking relationships?: not found

4.25 Patterns of descent (e.g., bilateral, matrilineal) for certain rights, names or associations:

Karen trace their lineage through the female line (4).

4.26 Incest avoidance rules:

Traditionally, it was not uncommon for relatives, usually second or third cousins, to wed, but first cousins very rarely married (7). Nowadays, the men and women are generally free to choose their own marriage partners, and incest is less common (4).

4.27 Is there a formal marriage ceremony?

Wedding ceremonies depend on the religion the family practices. These could be Christian, Buddhist or Animist. Christian ceremonies are done in a church and Buddhist ceremonies are done in the temple. Animist wedding ceremonies usually last over several days and is often a long process for the bride to prepare (5).

4.28 In what way(s) does one get a name, change their name, and obtain another name?:

The Karen people do not traditionally use surnames, but instead use names or nicknames given to them at birth. However, Karen who have resettled outside Burma are increasingly adopting the use of surnames (6).

4.29 Is marriage usually (or preferred to be) within community or outside community? (m/f difference?):

Karen persons tend to marry within their own local cultural group (6). Traditionally, marriages between a Karen and a member of another race is not allowed (7).

4.30 Are marriages arranged? Who arranges (e.g., parents, close kin)?

Traditionally, some marriages are arranged. If a male is interested in a female, he will usually write a letter to her expressing his interest (5).

4.31 Evidence for conflict of interest over who marries who:

“Up to a generation or two ago marriages between a Karen and a member of another race was altogether tabu. Moreover, it was an almost invariable rule among the Karen that the young woman should belong to the same tribe as the youth. Even to this day one who marries into another tribe is looked at a little askance and is spoken of as having married outside” (7).

Warfare/homicide

4.14 Percent adult (male) deaths due to warfare: not found

4.15 Outgroup vs ingroup cause of violent death:

Each year, the Burmese military attacks Karen villages. The Burmese burn down the entire village, destroying crucial crops and supplies (5).

4.16 Reported causes of in-group and out-group killing:

“A stable government was never established within Burma/Myanmar. Any attempts at negotiations among the ethnic groups including the Karen were destroyed by assassination and military oppression. The Karen were joined by many other ethnic groups including the Shan, the Chin, the Kachin and the Mon in the development of ethnic resistance armies” (5).

4.17 Number, diversity and relationship with neighboring societies (external relations):

“The Karen were joined by many other ethnic groups including the Shan, the Chin, the Kachin and the Mon in the development of ethnic resistance armies” (5).

4.18 Cannibalism?: Not found

5. Socio-Political organization and interaction

5.1 Mean local residential (village) group size:

about 20-30 families (7)

5.2 Mobility pattern: (seasonality):

A village is usually rebuilt on a new site each year. This new location is sought out by the local chief during the hot season, after conference with the elders (7).

5.3 Political system: (chiefs, clans etc, wealth or status classes): no specifics found

5.4 Post marital residence:

After marriage, the husband will come to live with his wife and her parents (matrilocal) (5).

5.5 Territoriality? (defined boundaries, active defense): not found

5.6 Social interaction divisions? (age and sex): not found

5.7 Special friendships/joking relationships: not found

5.8 Village and house organization:

It is common for many generations to live close to each other, but due to the conflict in the Karen state, family members have often been forced to live separately from each other (5).

Traditionally, the village is a single-structure village. The village can be described as a “bamboo apartment-house on stilts” accommodating on average from 20-30 families. Each family occupies one room that faces a central corridor (7).

5.9 Specialized village structures (mens' houses):

The village is a single-structure village (7), but no information was found on specialized structures such as mens' houses.

5.10 Sleep in hammocks or on ground or elsewhere?:

ground (7)

5.11 Social organization, clans, moieties, lineages, etc: not found

5.12 Trade: not found

5.13 Indications of social hierarchies?:

Elders are respected, as well as teachers, pastors, priests and those with education. Normally, you walk behind those who are elders and those that are senior to them (5). Doctors have high social status, so patients may not be comfortable questioning them about treatment (5). Direct eye contact with anyone is considered not polite, because it is a sign of equal status (5).

6. Ritual/Ceremony/Religion (RCR)

6 Time allocation to RCR: not found

6.1 Specialization (shamans and medicine):

Elders may know traditional medicine (6).

6.2 Stimulants: not found

6.3 Passage rituals (birth, death, puberty, seasonal):

There are no ceremonies to mark birthdays or rites of passage into adulthood (6).

6.4 Other rituals:

6.5 Myths (Creation):

“The most striking story is that of "Htaw Meh Pa," the mythical founder of the Karen race, who lived with his numerous family in some unknown land to the North, where their fields were ravaged by a great boar. The patriarch went out and killed the boar; but when the sons went to bring in the carcass, they could find only one tusk, which had been broken off in the fray. The old man made a comb made out of this, which surprised them all by its power of conveying eternal youth to all who used it. Soon their country became overpopulated, and they set out to seek a new and better land. They traveled together till they came to a river called in Karen "Hsi Seh Meh Ywa." Here the old man became impatient at the long time it took the members of the family to cook shellfish and went on ahead, promising to blaze his path that they might follow him through the jungle. After a while the Chinese came along and told them how to open the shells to get out the meat; and then, having eaten, they followed the old man, only to find that the plantain stalks he had cut off had shot up so high that it seemed impossible to overtake him. They, therefore, settled down in the vicinity. The patriarch went on, taking with him the magic comb which has never been discovered to this day” (7).

6.6 Cultural material (art, music, games):

A central theme of Karen life is artistic expression, such as drama, dance, music, painting, and poetry (6).

6.7 Sex differences in RCR: not found

6.8 Missionary effect: not found

6.9 RCR revival: not found

6.10 Death and afterlife beliefs:

Christian Karen bury their dead, while Buddhists and Animists perform cremations (5). During the ceremony, spiritues are encouraged to leave the area rather than hang around the community (5). Ghost stories in the community are about deceased members of the community who continue to haunt the area (5).

6.11 Taboo of naming dead people?:

Traditionally, Karen use names and nicknames, no first or last names (4).

6.12 Is there teknonymy?: not found

6.13 Briefly describe religion (animism, ancestor worship, deism, magic, totems etc.):

“Karen people were originally animists. Today it is estimated that approximately 70% are Buddhist, Buddhist-animist, or animist, and 20% to 30% are Christian. The interplay between Karen religious beliefs (Buddhism and Christianity) and traditional animist beliefs is evident in Karen culture, but Karen persons do not associate their ethnic identity with a particular religion” (6). The Pa’o people are primarily Buddhist; The Pa’o are 77.3% Buddhist, 1.7% Christianity and about 20.60% animist (2).

7. Adornment

7.1 Body paint: none found

7.2 Piercings:

Both men and women wear earrings (plugs instead of rings). The men’s plugs are covered over with silver while the women’s remain open. Leaves or flowers are sometimes inserted in the opening (7).

7.3 Haircut: none found

7.4 Scarification: none found

7.5 Adornment (beads, feathers, lip plates, etc.):

Every Karen carries a bag slung over his shoulder as a part of the outfit, which carries everything from money to the small game that he shot (7). Silver bracelets and anklets are pounded out of coins for girls, young women, and even sometimes little boys. Men wear beads around their necks with other ornaments on their arms and legs (7).

The men wear a boar’s tusk comb behind the ear, hanging down as a sort of earring (7). “The comb, which is not unlike the ordinary Karen comb, is made of strips of the outer shell of the bamboo, each about two inches long, and held together by a sealing-wax produced from the gum of a tree. The upper or pointed end of the comb is made small enough to be inserted into the open end of the tusk, where it is fixed in place with wax” (7).

7.6 Ceremonial/Ritual adornment: none found

7.7 Sex differences in adornment:

“The basic and the traditional Karen dress for men are red cotton shirt with woven pattern and blue wide-leg trousers.

Married women wear red skirts and red shirts more decorated than the men’s. An unmarried woman traditionally wears a white, long sack-like dress” (5).

7.8 Missionary effect:

In refugee camps, it is common to see Karen people in western clothing, such as denim jeans and t-shirts (6).

7.9 Cultural revival in adornment: none found

8. Kinship systems

8.1 Sibling classification system: not found

8.2 Sororate, levirate: not found

8.3 Other notable kinship typology, especially cross-cousin (MBD/FZD) typology (Crow/Hawaiian/Omaha etc.): not found

9. Other interesting cultural features (list them):

1. “Rather than being known for its diverse ethnic history and rich natural resources, Burma is distinct as the setting of one of the longest-running civil wars in the world.” -Ward, 2002 (5)
2. Being direct is culturally considered rude, and Karen find American directness, loud speech, and body language uncomfortable (5).
Often when answering a question that demands an affirmative answer, the Karen will say “no” instead of “yes.” This is a sign of modesty and politeness. Often the Karen are polite to a fault, and it can be hard to assess their needs (4).
3. 140,000 refugees from Burma, mostly Karen, are living in refugee camps in Thailand, some for as many as 20 years (4).
4. The Karen tribe was the first to convert to Christianity. Its people are often sent to other tribes as Christian missionaries. (4).
5. Domestic violence is not uncommon and is often associated with the consumption of alcohol. Because of their extreme level of politeness, domestic violence may be very hard to detect and most often other Karen refugees will not come forward to report it either (4).

Numbered references

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