

Cultural background: Rakhine

(Rakhine refugee students from Rakhine state in Burma/Myanmar)

The Rakhine and Rohingya live in Rakhine state, also called Arakan. The Rohingya are Muslim and the Rakhine are Buddhist.



Language

Arakanese, which includes three dialects: Sittwe-Marma (spoken by two-thirds of Rakhine), Ramree, and Sandoway

Teaching in the Classroom

Formal education provided through government-led Basic Education schools. Basic Education schooling lasts 11 years: 5 years of primary school (Kindergarten to Standard 4) and 6 years of secondary education. Students graduate at 16 or 17 years old.

Rakhine's education system is highly marginalized and ranks very poorly for both primary and secondary school attendance, as well as for gender parity. Common barriers to education are dilapidated buildings, overcrowded classrooms, a shortage of teachers, inadequate facilities and the absence of teaching and learning materials.

Rakhine offers alternative educational institutions including those run by non-governmental organizations and churches. Short-term Basic Literacy Education camps try to give children and adults basic reading, writing and arithmetic skills.



Family /School Engagement

In Rakhine state, there have been particularly bitter tensions between the Rakhine people, who are Buddhist and make up the majority of the state's population, and Muslims, who are mostly Rohingya. You will need to be aware of this divide when interacting with families from Rakhine.

Many of the larger cultural norms practiced in Burma can be found among the Rakhine people. For example, traditionally, Burmese do not have family names. A man named Htay Maung might have a wife named Win Swe Myint and two children named Cho Zin Nwe and Than Tut. None of the names has any relationship to the others; each is individual. The absence of surnames creates problems when Burmese are asked to fill in forms in the USA.

Furthermore, students in your classroom who are ethnically Burman may have parents who experienced severe political persecution, though they themselves may have been born in the USA or been very young when their families came to the USA. Literacy rates of adults in Burma are estimated at approximately 60%. However, Burmese adults in the USA are likely to be more educated than the average Burman.

It is important to keep in mind that many refugees do not know how to drive or lack access to a car, so transportation to school events will be a challenge even if parents want to be involved.

Respect for elders is important. Thus, younger persons do not sit at a level higher than that of an elder in the same room, nor do they sit with their feet pointing at elders. The feet are regarded as the least noble part of the body, and it is disrespectful to point them toward someone deserving your respect. Use both hands to give something to, and receive something from, an older person. It is considered rude to touch people on the head, which is considered the spiritually highest part of the body.

Burmese tend to be reserved until friendships are formed. Losing one's temper is a sign of bad manners and poor upbringing.

Gender, Culture, and Family



There is an emphasis on family and community and a respect for elders and ancestors. In general, men and women do not interact in public. Arranged marriages are acceptable. Extended families live together in one house, with men commanding the most respect. Women, however, play an important role in Rakhine society, often making decisions for the family.

There is a distinctive Indian influence throughout the culture, in particular with regard to its food, music and literature. Rakhine people have their meals in the late morning and early evening. Like most Myanmar cuisine, plain ingredients are enhanced with the use of chilies and spices. Rice and vegetables tend to be available at every meal, along with meat and fish when supply allows.