

## Cultural background: SHAN

*(Shan refugee students from Shan State in Burma/Myanmar)*

During conflicts with the Burmese government, many Shan villages have been destroyed and their inhabitants internally displaced or forced to flee into Thailand. Unlike the Karen or Karenni, however, they are not recognized as refugees by the Thai authorities, and instead many work as illegal or undocumented laborers. Shan make up a very small percentage (less than 10%) of total refugees from Burma resettled in the USA.



## Language

Shan

## Teaching in the Classroom

Burma (Myanmar) has suffered civil war, political oppression and ethnic conflict since the 1950s. Burma includes over 100 different ethnic minority groups, including the Shan. With an estimated population of 6 million, the Shan live primarily in the Shan State, Burma's largest ethnic state, located in the northeast of the country. There are approximately 100,000 Shan refugees in the border region who are not in camps. Shan refugees only make up approximately 2% of total registered refugees along the border. The one Shan refugee camp that does exist is in a very remote region and has had less international aid than other camps for refugees from Burma.



Education in Shan state is limited. Schools are under-resourced and there are not enough teachers. Young boys may attend monastic school. Most students report they see school as important and valuable but also realize they have limited opportunities for further education. Modern Shan parents often try to teach their children to read and write in their native language as a political statement and commitment to their culture.

Many Shan refugees are classified as illegal migrants in Thailand. A very small percentage may have had access to refugee camp schools, but most likely they either attended migrant schools in Thailand or did not attend school. The original Thai government policy prevented westerners from working as teachers in camps, but instead to only serve as advisors to teachers. Students who do attend camp schools attend in semi-permanent buildings. Students are not allowed to study materials that contain political ideas or values. There are typically no tables, chairs or textbooks.

## **Family/School Engagement**

Shan parents are likely to have limited educational experiences. Most Shan have not completed high school.

Shans are used to travelling and visiting friends, so Shan parents may be an easy group to engage in classroom activities. Shans typically introduce one another using a polite address, often "Sai" for men and "Nang" for women.

Shan culture has many traditional dances: some involve young children and some involve groups of young men. Inviting parents to teach these dances during after-school or school hours may help Shan families feel connected to the school community. Music may be another area to engage and connect with Shan families, who may know how to play drums, gongs and/or bamboo flutes.

Sports are very popular for men in Shan state, including martial arts and takraw, a ball game similar to hacky sack but with a large wicker ball. These extracurricular activities may help parents feel welcome in your school, especially if they do not read or write. Shans also enjoy films and may be interested in attending movie nights at your school. If you are hosting a parent teacher-conference, you can help your parents feel welcome by offering them tea.

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.

### **Culture, Gender and Family**

Most Shan are Theravada Buddhists. Many Shan boys have tattoos, which are thought to protect the individuals from illness or disease. Cleanliness is very important to most Shans.

In traditional Shan culture, men take on public roles while women are responsible for the home and children. While women may sell at markets or engage in some work outside of the home, men tend to make large financial decisions. Shan men are expected to take strong leadership roles in their families. There is a saying in Shan culture that if a man is dominated by his wife, he will be in debt.