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Introduction

Lying between the Tropic of Cancer and the equator, this kite-shaped country of approximately 55 million people shares land borders with Bangladesh to the west, India to the northwest, China to the northeast, Laos to the east, and Thailand to the southeast. The Andaman Sea and Bay of Bengal form the southern and southwestern borders.1,2,3 Ruled from 1962 until 2011 by a brutal and repressive military junta, Burma retreated into one of the most closed and isolated states in the world.4 But 2010 elections installed a nominally civilian government that has introduced some political and economic reforms and reopened Burma to the world.5,6

Burma is culturally diverse and home to over 100 ethnic groups.7,8,9 Most of these groups have been in Burma since the end of the first millennium C.E.10 Retaining their ethnic identities and speaking many languages, groups have largely remained in the areas to which they originally migrated.11 Relations among ethnic groups have often been troubled and violent. These continue to plague modern Burma as it seeks to unite as a nation and end ethnic violence.12,13,14

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Geographic Divisions

Burma, slightly smaller than the state of Texas, is the westernmost and largest of the mainland nations of Southeast Asia. Its coastline extends from the Bangladeshi border in the northwest down the Malay Peninsula to its border with Thailand in the southeast. Southern Burma consists mainly of the western slopes of the Tenasserim Mountain Range, which forms the northern base of the Malay Peninsula. Northern or “Upper Burma,” is dominated by the broad Irrawaddy Valley, a vast central basin. A “rugged horseshoe” of mountains surrounds the central valley, which runs north to south.

The five main geographic divisions in the country are the Western Mountains, the Northern Mountains, the Shan Plateau in the east, the Central Basin and Lowlands, and the Coastal Strip.

Western Mountains

The Western Mountains, averaging 1,829 m (6,000 ft) in elevation, run in a north-south direction along Burma’s western border from the Northern Mountains to the coast. The upper half of the region, which includes the Patkai Range, Naga Hills, and Chin Hills, forms the border with India. The lower half of the Western Mountains, formed by the Arakan Mountain Range, runs along the Bay of Bengal. The Arakan Mountain Range, starting at the Chin Hills and running along the coastline to the Arakan (Rakhine) Peninsula, protect the central region from the southwestern monsoon rains, creating a semi-desert landscape called the Dry Zone.

Northern Mountains

The Northern Mountains lie entirely within Kachin State in the northernmost reaches of Burma and form a boundary with China. Included in the range is the nation’s highest peak, Hkakabo Razi, at 5,881 m (19,295 ft). Some of Asia’s most significant rivers originate in the Northern Mountains including the Irrawaddy, the Salween, Mekong, and China’s Yangtze. Steep gorges cut by these major rivers characterize the region which is home to some of the major mineral sources including jade and other precious metals that are mined in the region. Subtropical vegetation and terraced rice paddies line the region’s deep valleys.

Shan Plateau

Occupying the eastern Shan State, this plateau ranges between 750 m (2,461 ft) and 1,200 m (3,937 ft) in elevation. The area is filled with deep valleys and gorges cut by rivers that flow through the region. The plateau originates in China, extends west to the Sittang River and merges in the north with Burma’s Northern Mountains. To the south, it joins with the Dawna Range and the Tenasserim Mountains of Burma’s Malay Peninsula. The regional climate is tropical with three seasons: a humid dry season (March through May); a wet season (June through September); and the cool season (October through February).
Central Basin and Lowlands

Extending from the Northern Mountains to the delta region, between the Arakan Mountain Range and the Shan Plateau, is the Central Basin and Lowlands. This area’s fertile valleys are formed by the rich alluvial deposits of the Irrawaddy and Sittang Rivers.36 The Bago Mountains separate the Irrawaddy Valley and the Sittang Valley.37 The delta area is uniformly flat, never reaching an elevation of more than 18 m (59 ft).38 A line of extinct volcanic peaks, located in the basin, includes the largest of the eroded volcanic cones, Popa Hill (1,518 m/4,980 ft).39 The region includes three major hydrocarbon basins along with Burma’s major oil fields.40

Coastal Strip

Burma has an extensive coast bounded by a multitude of islands. The upper half of the coast, the Arakan Coastal Plain, lies between the Bay of Bengal to the west and the Arakan Mountain Range to the east. This alluvial coast boasts rich farmland.41 The coast winds east to the Irrawaddy and Sittang deltas. South of the deltas is Burma’s lower coast, the Tenasserim Coastal Plain. This narrow strip of land, ranging from 48 km (30 mi) to 90 km (56 mi) in width, forms part of the border with Thailand on the Malay Peninsula. The coast is bordered by the Andaman Sea to the west and the Tenasserim Mountains to the east.42, 43

Climate

Burma sits in the monsoon belt, but its climate and rainfall varies considerably because of topographic features. The Tropic of Cancer divides Burma into two climatic zones. The southern

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two-thirds of the nation is largely tropical while the northern third is sub-tropical with a more temperate climate.\textsuperscript{44}

Seasonal monsoons are the major factor affecting climate and create three distinct seasons. The hot dry season extends from March to May. Throughout much of the country, temperatures average in the 30s°C (low 90s°F). Temperatures around Rangoon are only slightly cooler ranging from 24 to 36°C (75 to 97°F).\textsuperscript{45, 46} The rainy season is around late May to October. During this time, temperatures in Rangoon average around 29°C (84°F). The cool, dry season occurs between November and February with average temperatures around 20°C (68°F) in Mandalay and slightly warmer in Rangoon at 25°C (77°F).\textsuperscript{47, 48}

Rainfall averages, by themselves, mean little in Burma due to topographic variations. In the Dry Zone, rainfall can register less than 72 cm (28in) a year. The region lies in the “rain shadow” of the Arakan Mountains, which form a natural barrier between the Dry Zone and the Bay of Bengal.\textsuperscript{49} The rest of the country experiences heavy rainfall, almost all of which occurs during the summer. The Arakan and Tenasserim coastal regions receive up to 500 cm (196 in) of rain a year. On average, annual rainfall ranges from 150–250 cm (59–99 in) in the Irrawaddy Delta and between 100–200 cm (40–79 in) in the eastern highlands and the north.\textsuperscript{50, 51}

**Major Rivers**

*The Chindwin River*

The Chindwin rises in the far north, near the border with India and flows southwest for 840 km (522 mi).\textsuperscript{52} The upper part dissects successive mountain ranges covered in jungle. The lower reaches of

\textsuperscript{45} Donald M. Seekins, “Chapter 1: Introduction,” in *The A to Z of Burma (Myanmar)* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 3.
\textsuperscript{47} Donald M. Seekins, “Introduction,” in *The A to Z of Burma (Myanmar)* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 3.
\textsuperscript{50} Reggie Ba-Pe, “Profile of Burma,” 1988, http://members.tripod.com/Rbape/Bur_prof.htm
The river can span several miles in width yet may have an average depth of only three feet during the dry season. During the rainy season (June to November), the Chindwin is navigable for more than 644 km (400 mi) upstream. It ultimately joins the Irrawaddy above Pagan.53

**The Irrawaddy (Ayeyarwady) River**

The Irrawaddy covers a distance of 2,170 km (1,350 mi) and flows entirely within Burma.54 Navigable for the majority of its length, it is the country’s most important transportation artery.55 It follows a southerly route from its headwaters in the northern mountains. After it is joined by the Chindwin, its primary tributary, the Irrawaddy widens to as much as 6.5 km (4 mi). The Irrawaddy Delta begins about 225 km (140 mi) inland where the river branches into many tributaries. These tributaries carry mountain silt deposits, which fertilize one of the richest rice-producing areas in the world. The river ultimately empties into the Andaman Sea.56, 57

**The Sittang River**

The 418 km (260 mi) long Sittang River flows from the western edge of the Shan Plateau to the Gulf of Martaban. Its basin is geographically cut off from the Irrawaddy by a mountain range. The river is not navigable because of a strong tidal bore and swift currents, although it is used to float timber downriver. The Sittang does not carry as much silt as the Irrawaddy and its basin, which drains Burma’s eastern districts, is considerably less fertile.58, 59, 60, 61

**The Salween**

The Salween’s headwaters rise in China before crossing into Burma, where the river passes through the Shan States, the Karen Hills, and Tenasserim before flowing out into the Gulf of Martaban. The 2,415 km (1,500 mi) river traverses the deep gorges, hills, and tablelands of the Shan Plateau forming 161

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km (100 mi) of the border with Thailand. The force of the rapids prevent navigation 161 km (100 mi) north of the coast. The river has little commercial significance but does maintain political and military importance. The Salween creates a barrier for the peoples of the region, keeping them cut off from outside influence. The main economic activity on the river is floating timber and logs from the southeastern sections of Burma to the sea. Dams proposed for the river are meeting with major resistance as environmental groups call on the government to suspend proposed plans to build several dams along the river’s course.

Major Cities

Rangoon

Rangoon, renamed Yangon in 1989, is situated in the Irrawaddy Delta. It is home to approximately 4.1 million people. Rangoon, an administrative capital of colonial Burma, became the national capital after independence in 1948. In 2006, Naypyidaw became Burma’s new capital. Rangoon was originally a settlement that grew up around the city’s famous landmark, Shwedagon Pagoda, the nation’s holiest site. Upgraded to a town named Dagon by the Mons and later renamed Rangoon, its thriving shipbuilding industry reflected its status as an active port by the 19th century. Although the administrative functions of the government are in the capital of Naypyidaw, Rangoon remains the nation’s trade

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center accounting for more than 80% of foreign commerce. Rice, teak, and metal ores constitute the main exports.76, 77

Mandalay

Mandalay, founded in 1857, is Burma’s cultural capital and second-largest city with a population of 960,000.78, 79 Mandalay served as the Burmese royal capital from 1861 until the British conquest in 1885.80, 81 Today, it is the intellectual center of its monastic community (sangha).82 The most influential Buddhist universities in the country are located in and around the city which is said to have been visited by Buddha himself.83, 84, 85 Mandalay is a major commercial center with tea packing, silk weaving, jade cutting silverware, and goldware industries.

Mawlamyine

This southeastern city of approximately 220,000 people is an important port on the Gulf of Martaban near the Salween river’s mouth.89, 90 About three-quarters of the population is ethnic Mon. It was the capital of British Burma from 1827 until 1852.91 Ancient pagodas dot the hills surrounding the town. The city is home to an important diesel electric plant, Mawlamyine

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College, a teacher-training center and a large regional hospital. It also has a solar-powered plant that extracts salt from seawater.\(^92\)

**Naypyidaw**

In 2005, the ruling military junta abruptly announced that the capital was being relocated from colonial Rangoon on the coast to an area of malaria-infested jungle 400 km (249 mi) inland.\(^93\) Naypyidaw became the nation’s official capital in March 2006.\(^94\) Halfway between Mandalay and Rangoon, the city has a population of 418,000.\(^95\) Most of the government officials have relocated to the new capital but most of the foreign missions remain in Rangoon.\(^96\) The city, unlike other regions of the country, enjoys an uninterrupted supply of electricity 24 hours a day.\(^97\), 98

**History**

**Pre-Colonial History**

Human migration into present-day Burma began perhaps 11,000 years ago.\(^99\) The Mon, from eastern India, migrated before the first century B.C.E.\(^100\) Around the first century B.C.E., came the Pyu, from the Tibetan plateau.\(^101\) The Shans from the Yunnan region of China, arrived in the seventh century C.E. followed by the Burmans in the eighth century.\(^102\), 103, 104

103 Donald M. Seekins, *The A to Z of Burma (Myanmar)* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 403.
In 1044 C.E., the first Burman Empire was founded by King Anawrahta who defeated the Mon and united the country.\(^{105}\) The empire flourished until it was defeated by the Mongols in 1287.\(^{106, 107, 108}\) The country disintegrated into several smaller states allowing the Shan to fill the power vacuum for nearly 200 years.\(^{109, 110}\) By 1486, the Burmans were back in control dominating northern and southern Burma.\(^{111, 112}\) The Burmans continued their reign until they were defeated by the British in the third Anglo-Burmese War in 1885. In 1886, Burma officially became a part of British India.\(^{113, 114, 115}\)

**British Colonial Rule (1885–1948)**

Burma chafed under the yoke of British rule and by the 1900s, nationalism was resurging.\(^{116}\) In the 1930s, a group of university students, led by Aung San, was calling for full Burmese independence.\(^{117, 118}\) In 1937, Burma became an independent colony separate from British India.\(^{119, 120}\) Nationalists continued to press for full independence even as World War II broke out. The British issued an arrest warrant for Aung San and other nationalists who left the


country. After receiving training from the Japanese military, they returned to Burma to lead the Burmese National Army against the British. In early 1945, Aung San became disillusioned with the Japanese and organized an anti-Japanese resistance movement, finally throwing support to the British. In 1947, the British granted Burma its independence and later that year, Aung San became a cabinet member in the transitional government. Before the constitution was completed, Aung San and several other cabinet members were assassinated. U Nu, Aung San’s protégé, formed a new cabinet and, in January 1948, Burma became a fully independent republic.

*The Union of Burma (1948–2004)*

The first years of independence were plagued with violence. At least five ethnic groups waged war against the new state. Premier U Nu asked General Ne Win, head of the army, to take temporary control of the government to quell the growing ethnic insurgency. The civilian government was restored after the 1960 elections but, in 1962, General Ne Win led a military coup which ousted the government and suspended the constitution.

By September 1973, Ne Win had been named president. In the following years, economic conditions worsened sparking violent protests in 1988. An estimated one million Burmese poured into the streets of Rangoon and Mandalay, demanding an end to military rule. Ne Win declared martial law and the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) superseded the constitutional government. Saw Maung became the leader of the ruling military junta.

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Confident it would win, SLORC held multi-party elections in May 1990, and the voting process was judged to be free and fair. The big winner was Aung San Suu Kyi, daughter of Aung Sun, whose National League for Democracy won decisively. The military invalidated the election and imprisoned Aung San Suu Kyi and many other activists. In 1990, the junta renamed the country Myanmar before giving itself a new name in 1997, changing from SLORC to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). Recent History

In September 2007, anger over rising costs again sparked demonstrations. The SPDC acted swiftly to put down the protests and arrest the leaders, some of whom had been involved in the “democracy summer.” The movement’s leadership, however, transferred to the monastic community, which organized a much larger protest movement known as the Saffron Revolution. In response, the junta applied greater force and was able to quell the monk-led demonstrations, earning another round of international condemnation. In 2010, Aung San Suu Kyi was released after years under house arrest.

In February 2008, the National Assembly completed a draft of a new constitution and held national elections in May. Widely viewed as a flawed election, the new constitution was approved. In 2010, Aung San Suu Kyi was released after years under house arrest.

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138 The junta proposed the name change in 1989, but it was not formally adopted until 1990. Although the United Nations recognized the name change, the United States did not. A statement by the British foreign office noted that the opposition movement in Burma did not accept the junta’s right to change the country’s name. See BBC, “Should It Be Burma or Myanmar?” 26 September 2007, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/7013943.stm
although at least 2,100 other political prisoners remained in detention. In November of that year, Burma held its first elections in more than 20 years. Widely hailed as a sham that heavily favored the military, the junta won 75% of the parliamentary seats. Aung San Suu Kyi won a seat and praised attempts at reform. Civilian President Thein Sein took office in April 2011.147

Burma has continued on a path of cautious reforms to open up the country. President Obama visited Burma in late 2012 praising and encouraging government reforms.148, 149, 150, 151 Achieving democratization will not be easy. President Thein Sein’s government is watched over by the military, which remains the most powerful force in the nation. Armed ethnic conflict continues and threatens future economic progress on which the nation’s stability depends. Nevertheless, there is a sense of cautious optimism about Burma’s prospects.152, 153, 154

Government

Burma’s nominally civilian parliamentary government assumed power in 2011.155 The head of state is the president who, along with two vice presidents, is selected by the parliament. The president has the power to appoint ministers, the attorney, the chief justice and to call parliamentary sessions. The president is not responsible to parliament or the courts so long as his actions are constitutional.156

The military retains a powerful governmental role. The Commander-in-Chief of the Defense Service appoints three generals to fill the positions of

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Minister of Defense, Minister of the Interior, and Minister of Border Affairs. Military personnel occupy 5 of the 11 positions on the National Defense and Security Council. The chief of the armed forces may, with presidential agreement, assume sovereign power, declare a state of emergency power, and assume all legislative, judicial, and executive powers.\[^{157}\]

The parliament is a bicameral legislature. The lower house, The House of Representatives, may have no more than 440 members of which 330 are directly elected. The upper house, The House of Nationalities, may have no more than 224 members, of which 168 are directly elected. At least one-quarter of the legislative seats are reserved for military personnel who are selected by the Chief of Defense Services.\[^{158,159}\] The judicial branch, which does not operate independently from the executive branch, is composed of a supreme court, a constitutional tribunal, and lower courts.\[^{160,161}\]

**Media**

Reporters without Borders ranks Burma at the bottom of its list for freedom of the press.\[^{162}\] Since the election of the new government, some regulations have eased. In August 2012, censorship for political and religious print media was lifted.\[^{163}\] Significant restrictions, however, remain. Private daily newspapers are still banned leaving only state-run papers. Journalists operate in fear of running afoul of the government under vaguely written laws.\[^{164}\]

A mere 1% of the people have access to and use the internet. Most access the internet through cybercafés which are expensive. Owners must keep browsing records of their patrons and submit them to the government each month. Connection speeds are so slow that it can take up to 90 minutes to open a single webpage.\[^{165}\] Foreigners are allowed to bring one laptop into the country, but it must be declared at the point of entry. It is illegal to own an unregistered modem.\[^{166}\] Mobile phone use is also limited (approximately 5% subscribers) and concentrated in urban areas. Internet access through mobile devices is limited.\[^{167}\]


Economy

Burma is one of the poorest nations in the world despite its significant reserves of oil, natural gas, timber, minerals, and precious gemstones. Although some experts say Burma has the potential to be the next “Asian Tiger,” the country faces serious challenges including poor infrastructure, lack of foreign investment, rampant corruption, and an unskilled labor force. Agriculture remains the backbone of the economy employing 70% of the Burmese labor force and accounting for nearly 40% of GDP. The industrial sector accounts for approximately 19% of GDP and employs about 7% of the Burmese labor force. In recent years, however, the sector has grown only marginally and without a huge investment in infrastructure, including electricity and transportation, is unlikely to develop in the near term. Tourism is a promising sector. As Burma opens up to international visitors, tourists are flocking to the nation. The government is investing money in its expanding tourism industry.

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Ethnic Groups

Burman (Bamars)

The largest group by far is the Burman, sometimes referred to as the Bamar ethnic group, who comprise 68% of the population. Originating in the Himalayas more than 1,000 years ago, their language is from the Tibeto-Burman family. Concentrated largely in the Irrawaddy River Valley and along the coastal strips, the Burman are overwhelmingly Theravada Buddhists.

Education is highly valued, and literacy among the Burman is high. Much of their culture involves rituals and rites of passage including the shinbyu ceremony marking a young boy's service as a novice monk. Burman families often have at least five children and most live in extended families that include four generations. Upon marriage, men commonly live with the woman’s family. This reduces problems with in-laws since men are generally out of the house working all day, thus limiting contact with the mother-in-law. If the couple lived with the husband’s family, a woman would be home with her mother-in-law nearly all day. The Burman have respect for and are expected to care for the elderly.

Although women occupy a lower status in Theravada Buddhism, men and women have equal rights in matters of property, marriage, and divorce. The husband turns his entire paycheck over to his wife who is in charge of all family household finances. Women have played active roles in society, particularly in business. Although women generally have not held positions of political power, one notable exception is Aung San Suu Kyi, head of the opposition party and member of parliament.

183 The political term “Burmese” refers to all the people of Burma, whereas the term “Burman” identifies just the ethnic group. See Donald M. Seekins, The A to Z of Burma (Myanmar) (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 129–130.
**Shan**


The Shan are a monogamous group that generally lives in nuclear family settings. The typical Burmese Shan family has six children.\footnote{Edith Mirante, “Shans: Family Life,” in *Worldmark Encyclopedia of Cultures and Daily Life* Vol. 4, 2nd ed., eds. Timothy L. Gall and Jeneen Hobby (Detroit, MI: Gale Cengage Learning, 2009), 868-869.} In traditional Shan culture, men and women were viewed as equals but within their Buddhist religion, women occupy a lower status. Shan women were politically active until the military junta took power. Many, however, have taken an active role in security rights for the minority Shan, especially for women. Many women continue to take active roles outside their homes, especially in business.\footnote{Edith Mirante, “Shans: Gender Issues,” in *Worldmark Encyclopedia of Cultures and Daily Life* Vol. 4, 2nd ed., eds. Timothy L. Gall and Jeneen Hobby (Detroit, MI: Gale Cengage Learning, 2009), 868-869.}

Karen

The Karen, Burma’s second-largest minority group, arrived in Burma approximately 2,500 years ago, settling in the Irrawaddy River Valley. The region was the end point in the Karen’s multi-staged migration from what is present-day Mongolia in the 6th or 7th century. Among the major subgroups are the Pwo Karens who are concentrated in the deltas of Burma, the Sagw Karen who live in the mountains, the Karennis (Kayah), Pa-Os, and Kayans who are concentrated in the Shan and Karenni states. Many people are familiar with the Padung, a subgroup of the Karen, sometimes known as the “giraffe people” because of the custom of women wearing heavy brass coils around their necks. Enslaved by the Mons and Burmans, Karens retreated to remote areas to avoid continued oppression.

The Karens are a matrilineal monogamous group in which adultery is taboo. They tend to marry for life and have an average of between three and four children. About 70% are Buddhists or animists and the rest are Christians. During the British colonial period, they were the group most loyal to British missionaries and colonialists. The British filled the ranks of the police and military with Karens who were acclaimed guerilla fighters for the Allies during World War

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II (WWII). Today, most Karens make their living growing rice, fishing or working in the mines.

The Karen National Liberation Army and the Karenni Army still operate. The Karen are one of the few ethnic groups that have not signed a peace accord and continue to fight for their independence. They pose no significant threat to the federal government but do wage low-level guerilla war.

The Mon

The Mon, comprising about 2% of Burma’s population, are related to the Khmer of Cambodia. Their Mon-Khmer dialect is distantly related to some Indian languages. The current government policy discouraging learning the Mon language has resulted in many Mon being able to speak only Burmese. Among the original inhabitants of present-day Thailand, the Mon are located in southern Burma in Mon State. The Mon are Theravada Buddhists and most villages have a pagoda as well as a monastery, which also serves as a school.

The suppression of the Mon language by the Burmese government has fueled considerable resentment. Efforts to create an autonomous Mon region led to the creation of the Mon National Liberation Army (MNLA) and one of the nation’s longest running insurgencies. The MNLA signed a cease-fire agreement with the government in 1995, but it fell apart in 2010. The group has refused to heed government demands to disarm. Therefore, the government has ended all attempts at communication. Mon society suffers from other problems including drug-addiction and a high rate of HIV/AIDS infections resulting from intravenous heroin use.

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221 Jane’s Sentinel Security Assessment, Southeast Asia, “Non-state Armed Groups,” 10 January 2012.
The Chin

The Chin constitute 2.5% of the population. They live in Chin State in the sparsely populated Western Mountains of northern Burma. Although subgroups speak various dialects, the language belongs to the Tibeto-Burman family.230, 231 Traditionally animists, the Chin were overwhelmingly converted to Christianity during the British colonial period. Approximately 90% of Chin are Christians and most are Baptists.232, 233, 234, 235

The majority of Chin live a rugged lifestyle as nomadic (swidden) farmers moving each year to new plots of land. They often transport goods on their backs and shoulders since few people own horses or carts. In this patriarchal group, women are the main source of agricultural labor as well as responsible for household duties. The Chin generally weave their own clothes and fabricate their own utensils from bamboo.236 Families are large with an average of five children. Women live with their husbands’ family. Sons are supposed to care for parents in their old age with the major responsibilities falling to the daughter-in-law.237

The Kachin

The Kachin, comprising about 1.5% of the population, are an ethnic group composed of seven tribes living in the Northern Mountains.238, 239 The tribes, who migrated from China, speak a version of the Tibeto-Burman language. Approximately two-thirds are Christians and the remaining one-third are Buddhists or animists. Spirits (or nats) are important not only to the animists but even among the Buddhist and Christian population who worship nat spirits.240

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The Kachin trace their descent only through their fathers. They, unlike most groups in Burma, use family names. Most Kachin marry in their teens or early twenties and have six or more children. The Kachin clan system establishes rules for who can marry whom. Most of the population is engaged in farming but joining the military has long been a valued tradition. Many Kachin were among the military ranks of both the British and Burmese armies and, today, many have enlisted in the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) which operates in both Kachin and Shan states. The KIA is one of the strongest militant groups in the nation and has recently formed alliances with other insurgent groups in the region. The KIA has thus far rejected appeals from the government for a ceasefire and continues to inflict casualties and disrupt peace talks in the region.

The Rakhine

The Rakhine, descendants of the Pyu people and early Indians, live in the coastal regions of western Burma in Rakhine State. Their language is a dialect of Burmese. They are overwhelmingly Buddhists and every male child becomes a monk, although for some their service may last only a few days. Families are large, often with five or more children. Most Rakhine are farmers, fisherman, or traders.

Ethnic tensions between the Buddhist Rakhine and the Muslim Rohingyas in Rakhine State began to grow in the 1930s. Following independence, both groups formed insurgent groups to battle the new government and tensions between the two groups increased. The ethnic divisions have erupted into violence. More than 100,000 people had been displaced and hundreds more killed by the end of 2012.

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241 Donald M. Seekins, The A to Z of Burma (Myanmar) (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 239.
247 Donald M. Seekins, The A to Z of Burma (Myanmar) (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 239.
Chapter 1 Assessment

1. Burma is approximately the size of Texas.  
   **True**  
   Burma, slightly smaller than the state of Texas, is the westernmost and largest of the mainland nations of Southeast Asia.

2. Burma has two distinct seasons.  
   **False**  
   Seasonal monsoons are the major factor affecting climate and create three distinct seasons: the humid dry season extends from March to May; the rainy season is from June through September; and the cool, dry season occurs between October and February.

3. Rangoon is the capital of Burma.  
   **False**  
   Rangoon was Burma’s capital from 1948 until 2006 when Naypyidaw became Burma’s new capital.

   **True**  
   In 1947, the British granted Burma its independence. In January 1948, Burma became a fully independent republic.

5. Burma’s ethnic groups have largely been assimilated in recent decades.  
   **False**  
   Burma is culturally diverse and home to over 100 ethnic groups. Retaining their ethnic identities and speaking many languages, the groups have largely remained in the areas to which they originally migrated.
CHAPTER 2: RELIGION

Introduction

In Burma, 89% of the population is Buddhist, but among the Burman, nearly 100% are adherents of Theravada Buddhism. The Mon first adopted Theravada Buddhism, the oldest and most conservative form of the religion, around the third century B.C.E. By the ninth century C.E., the religion had spread to the northern areas of Burma where it combined with other religious forms including Mahayana and Tantric Buddhism. By the 11th century, the Bamar king, Anawrahta, made Theravada Buddhism the official state religion. Elements of other religious forms, including the worship of spirit gods, infused Buddhist practices.

Buddhism is woven into the daily lives and culture of most Burman. Monks are a common site throughout the nation. Shrines and pagodas dot the landscape, and most people clasp their hands and bow their heads when passing one. The government recognizes numerous Buddhist holidays as national public holidays. Although Buddhism is often regarded as a tolerant religion, the overwhelmingly Burman government and military have been accused of trying to force ethnic groups to convert and of quashing their cultures.

Religions

Theravada Buddhism

Theravada Buddhism stresses spirituality, self-enlightenment, the importance of pure thoughts and deeds, and the importance of a monastic life. The major tenet is that nothing in the world is permanent, and attachment to temporary things brings only sorrow and misery.²⁶²

Theravada Buddhism does not believe in one omnipotent creator of the Universe. For a Theravada Buddhist, the ultimate goal is to leave behind the cycle of pain and suffering (samsara) on earth and enter nirvana (nibbana). An individual released from the cycle of samsara will never be reborn but will live in a perpetual state of bliss.²⁶³, ²⁶⁴

Buddha taught that the pain and suffering of life could be escaped by reaching a state of enlightenment or nirvana. Meditation represents the way to enlightenment. Each individual must find and travel his/her own path to enlightenment without the help of a supernatural god. Followers are admonished not to take things that are not freely given; to avoid lying, idle chat, and gossip; and to refrain from hurting any living thing. They are also prohibited from drinking and using drugs. Monks are forbidden to eat after noon and may not handle money.²⁶⁵, ²⁶⁶, ²⁶⁷

Indigenous Religion

Before Buddhism arrived in Burma, the people practiced spirit (nat) worship, but today only about 1% of the population count themselves as nat worshippers.²⁶⁸, ²⁶⁹ Animists worshiped nature spirits called nats who represent natural forces including, water, wind, rocks, and trees. Nats could be forces for both good and evil. King Anawrahta consciously incorporated nats into Buddhism and declared them monk’s helpers. Today, statues of nats are often found in Buddhist temples.²⁷⁰, ²⁷¹

© ConnorMeehan 1996 / flickr.com
Old Buddhist temples in Bagan

Nats are the spirits of humans who suffered some great tragedy or unnatural death but have not been released from this earthly world. The spirits appealed to a Burmese king who granted each one a territory to rule. Although the specific individual nats change, their number remains constant at 37. All are ghosts or spirits of heroes except the chief nat, Thagyamin Nat. Shrines to each of the 37 nats can be found on top of Mount Popa, their spiritual home, in central Burma.

Many Burmese have a household shrine where offerings are left in an unhusked coconut. Ceremonies are officiated by shamans who combine music, dance, and trances to communicate with the spirits. Many such ceremonies are conducted by female shamans in private homes. The most important nat ritual occurs each year in the town of Taungbyon for six days around the time of the full moon in August.

Religion and Government

Although Buddhism is not the official state religion, the Burmese government, comprised almost exclusively of Burmans, strongly favors Buddhists and actively promotes Theravada Buddhism among ethnic minorities. This apparent favoritism has created religious tensions between Buddhists, Christians, and Muslims.

Restrictions of religious freedom, by the government and Constitution

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of Burma, affect not just non-Buddhist minorities but every religious group. All religious organizations are monitored by the government and must obtain permission before holding large-scale public events. Buddhist monks are restricted in their attempts to fight for human rights and political freedom. Many who were arrested in the protests of 2007 remain incarcerated. The government continues to control the Buddhist clergy and has imposed a code of conduct subject to criminal penalties. Imprisoned monks may be defrocked and prohibited from following elements of the monastic code. The law prohibits Buddhist monks and nuns from running for public office and voting in national elections.

Buddhist doctrine is evident in the state-mandated public school curriculum. Although non-Buddhists can opt out of classes, they must recite Buddhist prayers daily. Several Buddhist holidays are recognized by the state as national holidays.

**Influence of Religion on Daily Life**

The philosophical foundations of Theravada Buddhism among the Burman are evident in all aspects of daily life. Buddhism gives the Burman a sense of fatality and inevitability that creates resilience before hardship. Some seek the advice of fortune tellers who can suggest certain rituals that may increase their good fortune. Burman show respect to elders and rarely challenge authority.

Worship is a part of everyday life in Burma, and the first daily ritual is prayer. The family altar displays their family’s Buddha image, as well as flowers and candles. Tiny cups containing small portions of food and water are placed on the shrine in the morning and removed at noon. This ritual draws focus to the teachings of the Buddha while demonstrating love and respect. Theravada Buddhists believe that the enlightened nature of the Buddha is their own true nature, which they have not yet been able to fully attain. So when they pray, it is to that deepest part of themselves. Buddha is not a god and cannot respond to prayers or petitions. Yet many Burmese nonetheless pray regularly to Buddha for continued good health, wealth, success, and happiness.

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Exchange 1: When do you pray?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>When do you pray?</th>
<th>beh daw soo dawn jaam?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>We pray at noon.</td>
<td>nee leh ma soo dawn jaa ba meh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although women may become Buddhist nuns, female clergy do not have the same prestige as male monks, since nuns do not perform ceremonies for laypeople. As a result, fewer females than males enter the clergy. Virtually all men join the monastery at least once during their lives. Their stay can be a few days or a lifetime. A family earns great merit when a son joins a monastery. This rite of passage, known as novitiation (shinbyu), typically occurs between March and May. It involves shaving the head, putting on a robe, parading around dressed as princes and declaring one’s faith in the teachings (dhamma) of Buddha. To gain merit, those who do not have sons of their own often recommend other people’s sons join a monastery.292, 293, 294, 295

Religion and Gender

Buddhism teaches that men and women are equal and that they pursue the same path to nirvana.296 Women, however, cannot reach nirvana until they have been reincarnated as a man.297 Women enjoy a relatively high status in Buddhist societies, and Burma is no exception. Women have the right to inherit property, own land, and pursue an education. They enjoy equal rights in terms of marriage and divorce.298, 299, 300

In practice, however, within Theravada Buddhism, most females occupy a lower status. Because women cannot be monks and cannot achieve nirvana, the birth of a female child receives less celebration. Some shrines are forbidden to women.301, 302, 303, 304

Burman women take primary responsibility for the home including overseeing the family budget. Husbands generally turn over their entire paycheck to the wife. Daughters are not regarded as a financial liability because there is no tradition of marriage dowries.305, 306 Although few Burman women hold positions of political power, they play an active part in education and healthcare, run businesses and work alongside their husbands.307, 308

Religious Holidays and Festivals

The Burmese keep track of time with three calendars. The traditional Burmese 8-day, 12-month calendar, which began 638 years after the Christian era, is based on both the sun and the moon. For holidays, Burmese use the Buddhist lunar calendar, which is the same as the general lunar calendar except that it begins from the time of Buddha’s Enlightenment around 543 B.C.E. Burmese newspapers and official documents are dated by the Burmese calendar, but western dates are often added.309 Therefore, depending on which calendar one is consulting, the year could be 2012, 2556, or 1374.310, 311, 312, 313

309 Donald M. Seekins, The A to Z of Burma (Myanmar) (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 472.
312 Donald M. Seekins, The A to Z of Burma (Myanmar) (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 472.
**Buddhist Holidays and Festivals**

The Burman celebrate one major religious holiday: the Tazaungmone Light Festival in November (17 November 2013). Streets and homes are brightly lit, and the people give the monks new robes on the eve of the full moon. Teams of young women compete in weaving contests to make robes for the monks. During the Khatein ceremony, the robes, food, and other offerings are made to the monks. Another tradition is eating a bitter maezali salad, which is believed to keep one free of disease.

Throughout the country, there are numerous Buddhist festivals. Buddhists celebrate one major festival in each of the 12 lunar-calendar months. The Shwedagon Festival falls in February or March, the largest pagoda festival of the year. It is considered an auspicious day for building new pagodas. There is an overnight weaving contest for yellow robes for monks. Buddha’s birthday (Kason) falls on a full moon in April or May. It is known as a thrice-blessed holiday that celebrates Buddha’s birth, the day of his enlightenment and his experience of nibbana. On this day, Buddhists join a procession to the local pagoda and pour water on the Sacred Bo Tree.

**Waso**

This holiday falls in July and ends in October, corresponding to the rainy season. It marks the beginning of the Buddhist Lenten season. Monks, who undergo shinbyu at this time, are required to remain in one temple. Laypeople donate new robes for members of the monastic community to wear during this period. Flowers are placed at the feet of Buddhist statues by laypeople to demonstrate devotion, which is also shown through adherence to a more disciplined lifestyle. This may include giving up drink or fasting one day a week. It is intended as a period of self-reflection for all Buddhist Burmese.

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Lights, marks the end of Buddhist Lent. In addition to lighting pagodas, houses, and public buildings, it is a time to pay homage to monks, teachers, and parents and to ask for forgiveness for whatever transgressions one has committed during the year. 326, 327

Nat Festivals

Many Burmese believed that nats (spirits) control the conditions surrounding the lives of humans, which they can destroy if not properly appeased. Nat pwe (spirit festivals), carnival-like events held in huts, are occasions to call out the nat through a kadaw, literally a spirit’s wife. 328 But the kadaw is usually a male performer. Loud musical accompaniment reflects, in the words of someone who attended a festival, “sonic signs that the nats were in the house, or, more accurately, inside the bedecked and spangled bodies of Burma’s incomparable spirit mediums.” 329 One of the best known nat pwe is held in the town of Taungbyon north of Mandalay every summer. For six days, devotees drink, dance and sometimes experience spirit possession. 330, 331 The December Mount Popa Spirit Festival is held at the spiritual home of the nats. Lots of drinking and partying goes on at this festival, and revelers sometimes claim they are possessed by the spirits. 332, 333

Places of Worship

An estimated 500,000 shrines, pagodas and monasteries, many of them in varying stages of disrepair, are scattered throughout Burma. 334 Buddhist gods do not reside in pagodas, and devotees do not worship gods or pray to gods in a pagoda. Many pagodas also have a nat shrine where people pray to spirits for protection.

Exchange 2: May I enter the temple?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>May I enter the temple?</th>
<th>phyaa jan go wee loo ya ma?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
<td>ya ba deh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most pagodas in Burma are solid structures. The inner chambers of the temple (*pahto*) are regarded as holy caves.\(^{336}\) Although often reproductions, each pagoda contains a chamber housing relics associated with the Buddha. Platforms in the major pagodas have elaborate shrines, pavilions, and devotional halls. Shopping arcades sometimes lie along the covered stairways leading to the pavilion.\(^{337}\)

Exchange 3: Must I take off my shoes inside the temple?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Must I take off my shoes inside the temple?</th>
<th>phyaa jawn leh ma pha naa cho yaam?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
<td>hoo keh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Exchange 4: Do I need to cover my head?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Do I need to cover my head?</th>
<th>Khawn choon taa ya ma?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>ma taa ya ba bo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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\(^{337}\) Donald M. Seekins, *The A to Z of Burma (Myanmar)* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 83.


\(^{339}\) “Aglow in Buddha’s Embrace,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 June 2009, http://www.buddhistchannel.tv/index.php?id=18,8255,0,0,1,0

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Mandalay

The Mahamuni Paya (Great Sage Pagoda) is the holiest pilgrimage site in Mandalay. It houses the Mahamuni image, which dates to the first century C.E. The 4 m (13 ft) image of the seated Buddha, whose face is washed and teeth are brushed every morning at 4 a.m. by resident monks, was cast in bronze. Over the centuries, however, the statue has been covered by applications of gold leaf that have more than doubled its weight. The original face is all that remains visible. Visitors apply gold leaf to the area where they wish to retain good health. Only men are permitted to walk up and touch the statue; women must remain in a separate viewing area.

Behavior in Buildings of Worship

Visitors should remove hats and shoes before entering the main worship area. Mobile phones should be turned off and headphones removed. Avoid eating or chewing gum while inside. Shoulders should be covered, and both women and men should wear long pants.

Never sit next to or touch a statue of the Buddha or the raised platform on which it sits. Visitors should always back away from the statue before turning their backs to the Buddha. Avoid pointing at items in the temple. Use the right hand, palm facing upwards, to indicate an object. Feet are never pointed toward the Buddha statue. When monks or nuns enter the temple, visitors should stand as a gesture of respect.

and should not sit again until they have finished their prostrations.³⁴⁶ ³⁴⁷ ³⁴⁸

Women in a pagoda must not attempt to talk or shake hands with monks who may, when a woman passes, turn their back to her. If donating money to a monk, never hand it directly because monks are prohibited from handling money. Money may be given to a monk’s attendant (kappiya) or placed in an envelope.³⁴⁹ ³⁵⁰ Similarly, men should not touch nuns.³⁵¹ It is permissible to take pictures inside pagodas. Show respect by avoiding laughing and talking too loudly.³⁵² ³⁵³

Chapter 2 Assessment

1. Virtually 100% of Burmans are Theravada Buddhists.
   True
   In Burma, 89% of the population is Buddhist but, among the Burman, nearly 100% are adherents of Theravada Buddhism.

2. According to Theravada Buddhism, women cannot reach a state of nirvana.
   True
   Buddhism teaches that men and women are equal and pursue the same path to Nirvana. Women, however, cannot reach nirvana until they have been reincarnated as a man.

3. Nats are animal spirits.
   False
   Nats are the spirits of humans who suffered some great tragedy or unnatural death but have not been released from this earthly world. Although specific individual spirits among these nats have changed, their number remains constant at 37.

4. Buddhism is the official state religion of Burma.
   False
   Burma has no official state religion although the government, comprised almost entirely of Burman, strongly favors Buddhists and actively promotes Theravada Buddhism.

5. Virtually all male Burman become monks for some period in their lives.
   True
   Virtually all men join the monastery at least once during their lives. Their stay can be a few days or a lifetime.
CHAPTER 3: TRADITIONS

Introduction

The ethnic Burman (Bamar), comprising 68% of Burma’s population, are descendants of the Burman, Mon, and Tai-Chinese groups who settled the region.\(^{354, 355}\) The Burman population is primarily concentrated in the river valleys and plains, especially in the urban areas of Rangoon and Mandalay.\(^{356, 357}\) Their language, Burmese, belongs to the Tibeto-Burman family of the Tai-Chinese language. Burmese is the official language of Burma although English is widely spoken due to years of British colonization.\(^{358}\)

Nearly all Burman are Theravada Buddhists. Monasteries are the center of community life and monks are a common site on the streets. Meditation is a routine part of everyday life for many.\(^{359}\) In spite of their Buddhist faith, Burman have an active tradition of folklore and superstition. They believe in spiritual beings (nats) to whom people make offerings to gain favor and avoid misfortune. Burman also honor divine serpents (Naga) that live at the bottom of rivers, lakes, and oceans.\(^{360}\)

Since achieving independence from Britain in 1948, the Burmans have ruled the nation.\(^{361}\) They have often been accused of trying to quash the culture and ethnic identity of the more than 100 ethnic groups that make up the other 32% of the country’s population.\(^{362, 363, 364, 365}\)

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Honor and Values

Among the Burman, and Burmese in general, the loss of face (status or reputation) is considered intolerable but not enough to trigger suicide. People who cause another to lose face are often penalized. Juniors are expected, at all costs, to save face for their elders and seniors. Juniors should never contradict, disagree with, or criticize a senior in public. This feeling of *ah-nar-de*, not wanting to impose on others, is so pervasive some have called it a national trait. Older people experience this same feeling, and elderly parents may be reluctant to talk about their own problems in order to avoid troubling their children.

Friendship is an important cultural value and relations among friends may often be as close as those between blood relatives. True friends are not bossy, jealous, envious, or competitive. Friends are expected to share private thoughts and feelings and not doing so has been the ruin of many relations.

Burmese believe that one owes a debt to anyone who has helped along the way. Children feel gratitude to parents who have raised them. Students are indebted to the teachers who taught them. No matter how difficult it may be to fulfill these obligations, one should try to always be grateful.

Their Buddhist faith has created within the Burmese a sense of fatalism and resilience. Emotional self-control is a key value, and anger must be avoided at all costs. Their sense of duty to others, especially family, leads to a profound respect for self-sacrifice. The Buddhist regard for harmony and broad dislike for conflict suggest that the Burman may be less willing to take risk and are unlikely to challenge authority. Taken together, the basic values of Burman Buddhists have helped create a forgiving and generous people who stand strong in the face of adversity and struggle to forge a peaceful and harmonious community.

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Greetings

Burmese men usually greet other men with a handshake, a nod, and a smile. Women greet other women with a wave, a smile, a nod, or a handshake. Men and women also shake hands, smile, and nod when greeting each other. Burmese do not have a standard phrase for greeting each other. They usually ask a question such as “have you eaten?” or “where are you going?” Mingalaba, or “auspiciousness to you,” is the standard greeting for school children to teachers, but it is not commonly used by adults.

Exchange 5: Good morning.

| Soldier: | Good morning. | min glaa naa neh Khin ba |
| Local:   | Good morning. | min glaa naa neh Khin ba |

Exchange 6: How is your family?

| Soldier: | How is your family? | min mee taa zoo gaw beh loo leh? |
| Local:   | They are doing fine, thank you. | izwa beh, aa loo ney kawn jaa ba deh |

Kinship titles such as “elder brother,” “elder sister,” “uncle,” and “aunt” are often used among close friends even though they may be unrelated. These honorifics are quite common especially the terms “uncle” and “aunt.” The terms “U” (male) and “Daw” for women are frequently used by younger or juniors to address older or senior persons. Although there are many such honorifics attached to names, using “U” and “Daw” are generally safe, especially upon first meetings. Using a person’s name without one of these honorifics is considered rude and disrespectful.

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Exchange 7: How are you?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>How are you?</th>
<th>beh loo leh?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Fine, very well.</td>
<td>kaw ba deh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Exchange 8: Hi, Mr. Mawn Ba.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Hi, Mr. Mawn Ba.</th>
<th>hey, mam ba</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Hello!</td>
<td>heloo!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soldier:</td>
<td>Are you doing well?</td>
<td>ney kawn ya yeh laa?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
<td>ney kawn ba deh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Status of Women

Burmese women enjoy a much more equal status with men than other women throughout the region. They wield considerable influence in the home, and can fully participate in activities outside the home including work. Among most groups, kinship is traced through both the mother’s and the father’s lines. Men and women have equal rights with respect to inheritance, marriage, and divorce. Girls and boys are educated together and, today, more Burmese women attend universities than men. In other areas, however, women lag behind men, especially in positions of power. Only 20 of the 659 members of the new parliament are women. Women rarely occupy other powerful positions, including in the military.

Within the predominant Theravada Buddhist view of most Burmese, girls occupy a lower cultural status. The birth of a girl child is celebrated less enthusiastically than the birth of a son. Nevertheless, both girls and boys are treasured. The inability of women to become monks, however, consigns females to a second-class status in a society in which religion is woven into daily life. Women can achieve the state of Nirvana, but only if they are reincarnated as men. Some areas of Buddhist shrines are forbidden to women.

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Although they take primary responsibility for household duties including overseeing the family budget, women also run businesses and work alongside their husbands. Burman men customarily give their entire paychecks to their wives who manage household finances. Daughters are not viewed as a financial liability since Burmese have no tradition of marriage dowries. They, along with their brothers, will look after their parents in old age.  

**Hospitality and Gift-Giving**

*Hospitality*

Food at a Burmese home is not served in courses. Instead, the food is spread out on a table. A serving is taken from each dish and placed next to a serving of rice which is always placed in the center of the plate. Utensils are commonly used when visitors come. One eats from the spoon using forks only to push food onto the spoons. Burmese usually eat with their fingers, using only the fingertips of their right hands. But the prohibition against using the left hand for eating is not as rigid as in other countries. A small dish is often placed beside the main plate and is used for discarding bones. Women and children may not join in the meal. They may serve food or fan the guests with a palm fan.

Little conversation takes place during the meal. Instead, conversations normally take place when tea is served or with snacks before a meal.

*Gift-Giving*

If invited to a Burmese home for a meal, it is appropriate to take along a gift as a token of appreciation. Chocolates, cookies, nuts, or any kind of sweet treat is always appreciated. Useful gifts are another good choice. Small toys or crayons for children; toiletries or cosmetics for the hostess; calendars, ballpoint pens, or shirts for the host, are all good alternatives. Since they are rarely used, expensive or luxury items are not generally appreciated. Flowers are not a good choice.

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choice because they are usually reserved for funerals, used as female adornments or as an offering at a Buddhist altar.  

**Exchange 9: This gift is for you.**

| Soldier: | This gift is for you. | dee leh sawn ga min tweh ba de leh sawn ga min tweh ba |
| Local: | I cannot accept this. | ma yo beeyaa see neh |

Burmese will often protest a little when they are given a gift. The protests are sincere because Burmese feel that true friendship does not require presents. Gifts are rarely opened in front of the giver. To do so might make the receiver appear greedy. When gifts are opened, Burmese do not typically respond with effusive appreciation. Be aware that gift giving places a Burmese in a cultural dilemma: accepting the gift may make one appear greedy but failing to accept it would be rude. Nevertheless, a Burmese is likely to be pleased with an appropriate and thoughtful gift and is a gesture that will not soon be forgotten.

**Food and Eating Habits**

Burmese cuisine centers around oil-based curries (*hi’ n*), salads, and soups and nearly every meal includes rice. Common herbs include ginger, turmeric, garlic, chili, lemongrass, green onions, and coriander.

One of the most famous Burmese dishes is *mohinga*, a dish of thin or flat noodles eaten in a fish-based soup broth. It is especially popular as a breakfast dish.

**Exchange 10: This food is very good.**

| Soldier: | This food is very good. | dee aa saa aa sa ga tay kawn da beh |
| Local: | It’s *mohinga*. | dee haa moy hin Khaa ba |

**Exchange 11: What ingredients are used to make *mohinga*?**

| Soldier: | What ingredients are used to make *mohinga*? | moy hin kaa go ba neh cheh leh? |

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Local: Fish, fish sauce, ginger, lemon grass, pepper, turmeric, red pepper. naa, nan jaa yey, chin, sabalin, naa yoo tee moo neh soo nee neh chat da ba

Another favorite, often served at celebrations, is a dish of Chinese-style yellow noodles eaten in a coconut-curry with chicken (ohn-no khauk swei). Popular salads include maji-yweg thouq made from tamarind leaves and shauq-thi dhouq, made with indigenous lemon. Desserts are basic and include seaweed jelly (kyauk kyaw), a lump of palm sugar (jaggary), and tapioca pudding sweetened with jaggery and coconut (thagu byin). Mangoes, jackfruits, guava, watermelon, papaya, lychee, grapes, and pineapples are common in Burma.

Exchange 12: What is the name of this dish?

| Soldier: | What is the name of this dish? | dee hin go beh loo Kho leh? |
| Local: | This is chicken curry. | dee hin ga chaa taa hin ba |

Snacks include sticky rice cakes steamed in banana leaves, vegetable fritters, and lephet thoke, a salad made from oil-marinated tea leaves served with dried shrimp, garlic, and sesame seeds. With caffeine equivalent to a cup of strong coffee, the lephet thoke salad is a popular afternoon pick-me-up. The caffeine-free alternative is the gin dok salad made with pickled ginger rather than tea leaves.

Exchange 13: The food tastes so good.

| Soldier: | The food tastes so good. | dee aa saa aa sa teh aa ya ta shey da beh |
| Local: | Thank you. | kee zoo tin ba deh |

Water is usually drunk after a meal but rarely during or before eating. Tea is a popular beverage.

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Dress Code

Clothing has both an ethnic and a political dimension in Burma. Prominent activists argued against Western attire.407 Traditional clothing is a symbol of pride in Burmese heritage and became part of a “wear-homespun” campaign.408, 409

Among the Burman, both men and women wear the traditional sarong-like garment (longyi) known as htami (women) or pa-soe (men) that is knotted at the waist. Men wear collarless shirts (ingyi) and a round-necked jacket (taibon). Women wear short fitted blouses.410, 411 The color and designs of the clothing vary among ethnic groups and by gender. The Burman longyi uses fabric with checks, plaids, or stripes in any color.412, 413

Exchange 14: How should I dress?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>How should I dress?</th>
<th>beh loo woya ma leh</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Wear loose fitting clothes which cover your body.</td>
<td>po po ba ba aa woo ko woo loo ya ba deh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Exchange 15: Is this acceptable to wear?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Is this acceptable to wear?</th>
<th>dee ya way yin ya leh Kha maam?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
<td>leh Khan ba deh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Western dress is becoming increasing common, particularly in the cities.414, 415 Burmese are generally formal and, in business settings, a suit and tie is preferred although a shirt and tie with slacks is acceptable. Women wear long-sleeved blouses to offices or formal settings since sleeveless or short-sleeved blouses are reserved for casual settings. Skirts or pant-suits are appropriate attire for women. High fashion is less important than neatness.416

415 Donald M. Seekins, The A to Z of Burma (Myanmar) (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 274.
Non-Religious Holidays

Calendars and the Burman Holidays

Like much else in Burma, even the concept of time is complicated. The traditional Burmese calendar is based on both the sun and the moon. The Burmese era began 638 years after the Christian era, so their year 1374 begins in 2012 and continues through April 2013 after which begins the year 1375.417, 418 The traditional calendar has eight days in a week and 12 months in a year. In order to make accommodations to the western calendar, Wednesday morning and Wednesday afternoon are counted as separate days.419 For purposes of holidays, however, Burmese use the Buddhist lunar calendar which is the same as the general lunar calendar except that it begins from the time of Buddha’s Enlightenment around 543 B.C.E. According to the Buddhist lunar calendar, the year 2013 would be 2556–2557.420, 421 Burmese newspapers and official documents are dated using the Burmese calendar, but the western dates are often also added.422

The Burman celebrate one major non-religious holiday, Burmese New Year, which falls sometime in April. The five-day New Year’s holiday (18–21 April 2013) follows the Thingyan water-festival.423 Thingyan falls near the end of the hot dry season and helps welcome the new year. In 2013, the five-day holiday falls from 12–16 April.424 During the festival, revelers splash water on each other and on passersby to symbolize the washing away of last year’s bad luck and misdeeds.425, 426

National Holidays

Burma celebrates a number of other public holidays. Independence Day, is celebrated at precisely 4:20 a.m. on 4 January since independence was proclaimed at that time.427 On 12 February, Burmese celebrate Union Day commemorating General Aung San’s agreement at

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419 Donald M. Seekins, The A to Z of Burma (Myanmar) (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 472.
422 Donald M. Seekins, The A to Z of Burma (Myanmar) (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 472.
Panglong with leaders from Burma’s tribal ethnic groups to form a federation of partially self-governing states after independence.\textsuperscript{428} Peasants’ Day, celebrated on 2 March, recognizes the importance of farmers to the national economy.\textsuperscript{429} Tabaung Full Moon Day is celebrated near the end of March (26 March 2013).\textsuperscript{430} This is the last month of the Burmese lunar calendar and marks the end of the harvest season.\textsuperscript{431} Armed Forces Day (Tatmadaw), celebrated on 27 March, commemorates the day when the Burmese Independence Army marched against the Japanese.\textsuperscript{432}

**Exchange 16: Will you be celebrating the Water Festival?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Will you be celebrating the Water Festival?</th>
<th>min do taanjaan pweh daw tin pa jaam laa?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Yes!</td>
<td>hoo keh!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Labor Day (Worker’s Day) falls on 1 May and celebrates the common worker.\textsuperscript{433} Martyr’s Day, 19 July, commemorates the assassination of Aung San and other cabinet members in 1947.\textsuperscript{434} The final secular holiday of the year is National Day celebration which falls on a full moon in November or December (27 November 2013). This is the anniversary of the protest against the 1920 Rangoon University Act, seen by the Burmese as a colonial effort to limit access to higher education.\textsuperscript{435, 436}

**Do’s and Don’ts**

**Do** use *U* or *Daw* when addressing adults. It is a sign of respect important to the Burmese.

**Do** remove your shoes and socks before entering religious buildings, compounds, and private homes.

**Do** bow your head slightly when passing elderly people as a sign of respect.

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Do use your chin to point instead of your finger.

Do turn your head away from others before yawning as showing the inside of one’s mouth is considered impolite.

Do give people things with both hands, and respectfully bend forward as you do.

Don’t turn the bottoms of your feet towards a Buddha statue.

Don’t touch a Burmese person, adult or child, on the head.

Don’t initiate conversations about Burmese politics.

Don’t sit at the head of the table unless you are the senior person.

Don’t give money to a monk unless it is in an envelope. Monks are prohibited from handling money.
Chapter 3 Assessment

1. Loss-of-face is an intolerable affront to Burmese.
   True
   Among the Burman, and Burmese in general, the loss of face is considered intolerable but
   not enough to trigger suicide. People who cause another to lose face are often penalized.
   Juniors are expected, at all costs, to save face for their elders and seniors.

2. Mingalaba is a standard greeting among most Burmese.
   False
   Mingalaba, or “auspiciousness to you,” is the standard greeting for school children to
teachers, but it is not commonly used by adults.

3. Flowers are considered inappropriate gifts.
   True
   Flowers are not a good choice because they are reserved for funerals, used as female
   adornments or as an offering at a Buddhist altar.

4. Eating with the left hand is strictly prohibited in Burmese society.
   False
   Burmese usually eat with their fingers, using only the fingertips of their right hands. But
   the prohibition against using the left hand for eating is not as rigid as in other countries.

5. A Burman longyi is usually made from a fabric with solid colors.
   False
   The Burman longyi uses fabric with checks, plaids, or stripes in any color.
CHAPTER 4: URBAN LIFE

Introduction

Burma remains a largely rural nation with few cities of any significant size. Only 34% of the population live in urban areas. Approximately 11% of the population live in urban areas with more than one million residents, and only Rangoon has a population over one million. About 30% of the urban population live in Burma’s two largest cities: Rangoon and Mandalay.

Rural-urban migration stems from industrialization and increased economic opportunities in urban centers. In Burma, however, the process has depended much more on political rather than economic reasons. Rangoon served as a regional capital for the British and was a major trade and shipping center. When the British annexed Upper Burma, they encouraged many Indians to move into Rangoon to augment the labor force. In the three years following independence, city populations swelled dramatically as refugees sought greater safety while attempting to escape the guerilla wars and ethnic violence, especially along the border regions. After 1960, at least in Rangoon, rural-urban migration was no longer the most significant factor of economic growth. As the economy flagged, there were no jobs for immigrants. Urban unemployment was nearly four times that of rural areas.

New patterns in urban land use began to develop. Urban slums were razed and replaced with high-rise apartments and commercial buildings. The government is drafting a new 40-year urban development plan focusing on Rangoon and Mandalay. Among the highest priorities are

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improving and expanding infrastructure and tackling air pollution. Urbanization is likely to remain a major challenge as Burma continues to develop and become part of the world.\footnote{446}

**Urbanization**

The urbanization plans of the new government could drive unprecedented urban growth and development, but they will meet serious challenges of modernization and urbanization. Neither the federal government nor the cities are ready to handle these new challenges. Current city dwellers already face major problems caused by sagging infrastructure, which may only worsen in the near term.\footnote{447, 448} An estimated 10% of Rangoon’s population live in slums. Another 40% of residents have no piped water, and there is no central sewage collection or treatment system. Nearly three-quarters of the population have no access to electricity.\footnote{449} Electrical supplies are insufficient to meet demand causing persistent blackouts.\footnote{450, 451} The transportation infrastructure fares no better. The roads are in poor shape, riddled with potholes but not particularly congested. Buses, which carry an estimated 80% of urban commuters, are antiquated and dangerously overcrowded.\footnote{452, 453} Air pollution is a growing concern in the cities, particularly in Rangoon where particulate matter levels are 60% above the safety levels recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO).\footnote{454} The main source of the pollution is industry, coal-burning power plants, and vehicles.\footnote{455, 456}

\footnote{447} José A. Gómez-Ibáñez, “Yangon’s Development Challenges” (paper, Rajawali Foundation Institute for Asia, Harvard Kennedy School, Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation, March 2012), 1–6, \url{http://www.ash.harvard.edu/extension/ash/docs/yangon.pdf}
\footnote{451} José A. Gómez-Ibáñez, “Yangon’s Development Challenges” (paper, Rajawali Foundation Institute for Asia, Harvard Kennedy School, Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation, March 2012), 9, \url{http://www.ash.harvard.edu/extension/ash/docs/yangon.pdf}
\footnote{452} José A. Gómez-Ibáñez, “Yangon’s Development Challenges” (paper, Rajawali Foundation Institute for Asia, Harvard Kennedy School, Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation, March 2012), 10, \url{http://www.ash.harvard.edu/extension/ash/docs/yangon.pdf}
\footnote{455} William Boot, “Environmental Crises Threaten Burma’s Economy,” \textit{The Irrawaddy}, 21 August 2012, \url{http://www.irrawaddy.org/archives/12024}
Work Issues

In spite of the high rates of poverty (16% in 2011), unemployment is low in Burma (nearly 2%) because the primary problem is not jobs but low wages.\textsuperscript{457, 458} As Burma transitions toward a more open market economy, it is forging ahead with plans to improve its infrastructure and increase its industrial sector. The government is attempting to expand both trade and foreign relations as a means of creating a firm foundation for new economic ventures.\textsuperscript{459}

The task faced by the nation and by foreign investors is to try to rebuild some of the nation’s industries and expand existing industrial parks. Most of the growth potential and plans center around Rangoon where several new industrial areas have been established.\textsuperscript{460, 461} Planned development and expansion of several ports should result in an increase in construction and other industrial jobs. Tourism is set to see a rapid growth which should provide new jobs in the services sector including hotel, spas, and other retail enterprises necessary to sustain tourism.\textsuperscript{462} The most pressing needs are likely to be in technical fields like accounting, banking, manufacturing, and corporate government.\textsuperscript{463, 464} These jobs are expected to provide better wages and reduce urban poverty.\textsuperscript{465}

Much of the success of these initiatives depends on improving the educational levels of the population. The Burmese labor force consists largely of poorly educated unskilled or low-skilled

workers making marginal wages. Jobs requiring high levels of skills are difficult to fill because few Burmese have the training and education to meet job demands.

Healthcare

Healthcare in Burma is poor. Average life expectancy for urban dwellers is 71 for men and 64 for women. Maternal mortality rates are among the highest in the world. In spite of a recent increase in healthcare professionals, the system remains critically underfunded. The majority of doctors and nurses work in the private sector in urban areas, creating a severe shortage of rural practitioners. Even where there are adequate numbers of doctors, shortages of medications threaten patient survival and safety. Outside Rangoon, access to quality medical facilities is sparse. Visitors should avoid surgery or dental procedures because of the high risk of infections including hepatitis and HIV/AIDS.

Following rain, Rangoon’s inadequate drainage system allows water to collect creating breeding grounds for mosquitoes, increasing the risk of dengue fever.\textsuperscript{482}

Exchange 17: Is Dr. Mawn Mawn in, sir?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Is Dr. Mawn Mawn in, sir?</th>
<th>aa ko, dawta mawn mawn shee laa?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>ma shee ba bo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Healthcare is a constitutional right in Burma, but few have money to pay for available services.\textsuperscript{483, 484} The majority of Burmese (85\%) rely on traditional medicine because of its wider availability and lower costs.\textsuperscript{485} Although the government is working to provide comprehensive health services, including traditional medicine, patients still bear approximately 90\% of medical costs.\textsuperscript{486, 487}

Exchange 18: Is there a hospital nearby?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Is there a hospital nearby?</th>
<th>dee naa ma sey yon shee laa?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Yes, in the center of town.</td>
<td>hoo keh, meyo leh ma shee ba deh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Nearly half of Burma’s HIV infected patients live in Rangoon (13\%) and Mandalay (32\%).\textsuperscript{488} Burma has about 5\% of the worldwide cases of a drug-resistant strain of tuberculosis. A lack of medicine and facilities is slowing progress against the disease’s spread.\textsuperscript{489}


\textsuperscript{485} IRIN, “Most People in Myanmar Harp on Traditional Medicines,” OneWorld South Asia, 14 October 2009, \url{http://southasia.oneworld.net/news/most-people-in-myanmar-harp-on-traditional-medicines#.UP7ngYYbg1A}

\textsuperscript{486} Ministry of Health, Government of Myanmar, “Myanmar Health System” (paper, 2011), \url{http://www.moh.gov.mm/file/myanmar%20health%20care%20system.pdf}


\textsuperscript{489} Country Office for Myanmar, World Health Organization, “Multidrug-resistant Tuberculosis in Myanmar Progress, Plans and Challenges,” October 2012, \url{http://www.whomyanmar.org/LinkFiles/TB_MDT-TB_Factsheet.pdf}
Exchange 19: Do you know what is wrong?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Do you know what is wrong?</th>
<th>ba ma ney leh soo da min tee laa?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>ma tee ba bo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Education and Schools in Cities

Burma’s once strong educational system has greatly deteriorated since 1962, and shortages of materials, resources, and skilled teachers further compromise quality. Schools have resorted to charging “unofficial” fees to augment insufficient funds.  

Nationally, two-thirds of children enter elementary school but between 30% and 45% fail to graduate. Urban dropout rates are far lower than in rural areas.  

Approximately 67% of urban students attend the last grade of elementary school. Although approximately 75% of urban students attend secondary school, about 60% drop out before completion. Students drop out because of lack of schools, inability to pay school expenses, or work obligations. In 2006, the literacy rate was approximately 90% (94% men/86% women).

Basic public education consists of five years of elementary, four years of middle, and two years of secondary school. Elementary school is free and compulsory. Students passing an examination may enter secondary school. At the end of eighth grade, students must pass another examination before progressing to secondary school (grades 9–11). Following high-school, students may attend vocational training or university.

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Exchange 20: Do your children go to school?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Do your children go to school?</th>
<th>min yeh Kha ley dewy kawn twaa laa?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
<td>hoo keh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Rampant corruption in education causes seats in the best schools to be reserved for Burmese elite or those with government connections.500

Burmese universities have been strictly regulated since the 1988 protests. Many campuses were relocated to rural areas or forced to close for up to four years.501, 502 Distance education became a government priority as a means of reducing the potential of protests. The quality of education in most of the universities has declined to the point where training is inadequate and often regarded as little more than a rubber stamp.503, 504 The current president, however, is enacting a series of educational reforms designed to restore Burma’s education system.505

Restaurants

Rangoon and Mandalay have multiple dining options. Locals frequent the numerous Chinese restaurants. Western cuisine is largely confined to restaurants in larger hotels.506 Food from night market vendors can be unsafe and sometimes transmit cholera.507

Exchange 21: Are you still serving breakfast?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Are you still serving breakfast?</th>
<th>ma neh saa ya taay laa?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
<td>hoo keh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Exchange 22: May I have a glass of water?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>May I have a glass of water?</th>
<th>yey ta Khweh law pey ba?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Yes, right away.</td>
<td>hoo keh, ya ba deh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

Burmese meals include oil-based curries, rice, and side dishes. Restaurants often add an extra layer of oil. Protocol dictates that each person order an individual curry dish. Side dishes are shared among the group. Many Burmese eat with their hands but, in restaurants, a fork and spoon are often provided. Food is never eaten from the fork that is used to guide food onto the spoon.

Exchange 23: I’d like some hot soup.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>I’d like some hot soup.</th>
<th>hin yo poo poo ya ma laa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Sure.</td>
<td>ya ba deh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A salty fermented shrimp paste (ngapi) is often used to flavor the rice and is served as a condiment. Balachaung, a crispy mix of fried shrimp, garlic, onions, and fresh raw vegetables is another common condiment. Pickled relishes made from various vegetables accompany most meals.

Tea houses are popular places to purchase snacks, along with coffee and tea. Coffee and tea come presweetened. Black coffee is available upon request.

Exchange 24: I would like coffee or tea.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>I would like coffee or tea.</th>
<th>kofee daa ma maa ho leh phey yey taw chin deh</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Sure.</td>
<td>ya ba deh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is usual to pay for one’s own meal, even if invited to a restaurant. Tipping is uncommon.

Exchange 25: Put this all in one bill.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Put this all in one bill.</th>
<th>dee phyeh pin teh maa aa lon teh lay ba</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
<td>hoo keh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---


**Exchange 26: Can I have my total bill, please?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Can I have my total bill, please?</th>
<th>naa gon wey phyaa pin pey ba?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Yes, of course.</td>
<td>hoo keh, ya ba deh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Markets**

Major cities contain modern shopping malls, bazaars (*zei*), and night markets.\(^{516, \, 517, \, 518}\)

**Exchange 27: How much longer will you be here?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>How much longer will you be here?</th>
<th>dee ma beh law chaa chaa ney ma leh?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Three more hours.</td>
<td>naw taa ton naa yee law nee meh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Exchange 28: Is the bazaar nearby?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Is the bazaar nearby?</th>
<th>dee naa ma zey shee laa?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Yes, over there on the right.</td>
<td>hoo keh, ho naa ma nee yaa beh ma ba</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The indoor Bogyoke Aung San Market in central Rangoon contains over 2,000 shops selling local handicrafts, lacquer ware, ethnic minority items, quality gemstones and jewelry.\(^{519, \, 520}\)

**Exchange 29: Do you sell lacquer ware?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Do you sell lacquer ware?</th>
<th>yoon teh meya yawn laa?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
<td>hoo keh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Exchange 30: May I examine this close up?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>May I examine this close up?</th>
<th>aa nee kaa say sey loo yaa ma laa?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Sure.</td>
<td>ya ba deh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


More popular with locals and cheaper than Bogyoke Aung San, is Rangoon’s largest market, Theingyi Zei, famous for its incredible selection of herbs and medicines.\(^{521}\)

**Exchange 31: Can I buy a Shan bag with this much money?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Can I buy a Shan bag with this much money?</th>
<th>dee ngwey neh shan lweh et weh loo yaa ba ma laa?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>ma yaa naay ba bo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Exchange 32: Do you have any more of these?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Do you have any more of these?</th>
<th>dee ma dee ha meyo shee tee laa?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>ma shee daw ba bo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Bargaining is appropriate except in fixed-price government shops. One should never begin bargaining for an item unless one intends to buy it. Leaving a shop without a purchase, after a bargaining session is considered to be rude. To begin bargaining, a shopper should find some fault with the product in order to allow the vendor to lower the price without losing face. Bargaining is a slow process requiring patience and persistence. Anger is always inappropriate.\(^{522}\)

**Exchange 33: Please, buy something from me.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Local:</th>
<th>Please, buy something from me.</th>
<th>chey zoo pyoo ywey ta Kho Kho weh pay ba</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Soldier:</td>
<td>Sorry, I have no money left.</td>
<td>won neh ba deh kwaa, naa ma ngwey ma chan daw bo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Money and ATMs

Burma’s national currency is the kyat (MMK). In January 2013, USD 1 was equal to MMK 843.5. There are virtually no ATMs in the country other than a handful introduced late in 2012. Foreign cards do not work in Burmese ATM machines. U.S. dollars can be exchanged at the airport, a few banks, and some high-end hotels provided that the bills are in excellent condition with no damage. Credit cards are virtually useless in Burma except for a couple of expensive hotels in Rangoon and Mandalay.

Exchange 34: Can you give me change for this?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Can you give me change for this?</th>
<th>min dee ha neh leh naay ma laa?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>ma leh naay ba bo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Exchange 35: Do you accept U.S. currency?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Do you accept U.S. currency?</th>
<th>dolaar leh Khan ma laa?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>No we only accept kyat.</td>
<td>chet beh leh Khan ba deh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Transportation & Traffic

Cars

Burmese roads are generally in disrepair, especially outside the cities. Traffic congestion is uncommon, but in Rangoon, slow-moving vehicles, bicycles, and heavy pedestrian traffic create hazardous driving conditions. Truck drivers on the road between China and Rangoon allegedly drive under the influence of stimulants. Burmese drivers infrequently use their headlights, even at night, and many bicycles lack reflectors, making them difficult to see at night.

---

drivers are required to have a valid Burmese license. Under Burmese law, an automobile driver involved in an accident with a pedestrian is always at fault.

**Exchange 36: Where can I rent a car?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier: Where can I rent a car?</th>
<th>kaa beh ma naa loo ya ma leh?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local: Downtown.</td>
<td>meeyo teh ma yaa ba deh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Exchange 37: Is there a good auto mechanic nearby?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier: Is there a good auto mechanic nearby?</th>
<th>dee naa ma kaa peyin sa ya yawn yeh laa?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local: Yes.</td>
<td>hoo keh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Public Transportation**

Public transportation is available in the cities. Options include taxis, buses, and trains, but most of these are slow, unreliable, overcrowded, and uncomfortable. Public transportation, including planes and trains, fail to meet international safety standards.

**Exchange 38: Will the bus be here soon?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier: Will the bus be here soon?</th>
<th>bas kaa ma kaa Khin yaw la ma laa?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local: Yes.</td>
<td>hoo keh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Urban public transportation vehicles, including aging buses (*ka*), are unsafe. They are always packed with passengers often hanging over the sides and backs. Pick-up trucks with benches in the back and a roof over the bed are another common option.

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Taxis, both licensed and private vehicles for hire, are also available. There are no radio taxis in Burma.538

**Exchange 39: Where can I get a cab?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Where can I get a cab?</th>
<th>beh ma aa naa kaa ya naay ma leh?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Over there.</td>
<td>ho nna ma ya naay ba deh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Trishaws are bicycles with attached sidecars. Two people can ride in the side car, but they may not accommodate larger individuals.539

**Exchange 40: Can you take me there?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Can you take me there?</th>
<th>naa go ho phet Khaw twaa naay ma laa?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Yes, I can.</td>
<td>hoo keh, Khaw twaa naay ba deh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Trains are notoriously unreliable and uncomfortable. They take much longer than buses to travel the same distances.540, 541

**Exchange 41: Is there a train station nearby?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Is there a train station nearby?</th>
<th>dee naa ma yaa taa bo da yoo wo shee laa?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>ma shee ba bo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Air transportation falls below international safety standards. Visitors are urged to exercise caution and consult their embassy for the latest information.542, 543

**Exchange 42: Which road leads to the airport?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Which road leads to the airport?</th>
<th>ley say go beh lan ga twaa yin ya ma leh?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>The road heading east.</td>
<td>aa shey phet go oo teh bee twaa loo ya ba deh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

Street Crimes and Solicitations

Violent crimes in urban areas of Rangoon are infrequent. Outside the city in the more remote regions, opportunities for crime against foreigners increase because there are few police. The most common crimes are those of opportunity: pick-pocketing and stealing unattended items. Since people believe crimes against foreigners are more likely to receive police attention, locals are more common targets.544

Beggars are part of the landscape, but the government is trying to remove as many as possible from Burma’s streets in order to improve the national image.545 Some are illegal immigrants, largely from Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos. Recent crackdowns have resulted in the arrests of beggars as part of an effort to reduce immigration and human trafficking.546 In Mandalay, beggars often set up operations around the railway station. Some masquerade as monks or charity workers.547 Mothers with infants often make over USD 20 per day, nearly 10 times the daily wage of the average worker. Beware, however, that many of these women “rent” the infants for about USD 5 per day.548 Although there is little doubt that poverty and extreme circumstances have driven some beggars to their plight, others have refused work noting that they can make more money begging than working.549

Exchange 43: Give me money

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Local:</th>
<th>Give me money</th>
<th>cho naw go nowey pey ba</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Soldier:</td>
<td>I don’t have any.</td>
<td>nāa ma ba ma ma shee bo wa</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is impossible to give to every beggar who solicits money. If one doesn’t want to give, it is best to politely refuse and walk away. Buddhism believes that it is a moral duty to perform acts of kindness and to help others, and many Buddhists are predisposed to give something. To avoid the problems of being surrounded by a sea of beggars, Buddhists will sometimes throw a handful of coins into a group and let them scramble for the money.550

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Chapter 4 Assessment

1. Approximately 70% of Burmese live in urban centers.
   False
   Burma remains a largely rural nation. Only 34% of the population live in urban areas, and there are few cities of any significant size. Only 11% of the population live in urban areas with more than one million residents.

2. Urban unemployment rates are generally low.
   True
   In spite of the high rates of poverty (16% in 2011), unemployment is low in Burma (nearly 2).

3. Public transportation is safe in urban areas.
   False
   Public transportation is slow, unreliable, overcrowded, and uncomfortable, and fails to meet international safety standards.

4. Violent crimes are relatively rare.
   True
   Violent crimes in urban areas of Rangoon are infrequent.

5. The rural-urban migration pattern in Burma stems from greater economic opportunities arising from industrialization of the cities.
   False
   Rural-urban migration in Burma has depended much more on political rather than economic reasons. Cities grew because the British encouraged migration from India and refugees moved to cities to escape guerilla wars and ethnic violence.
CHAPTER 5: RURAL LIFE

Introduction

Today, as much as 70% of Burma’s population live in rural areas on farms. The Burman are concentrated in the central and southern regions in the states of Magway, Bago, Mandalay, Yangon, and portions of Sagaing. The country remains largely dependent on agriculture which accounts for nearly 40% of GDP and employs 70% of the workforce. It is nearly impossible for most farmers to even subsist from farming because they must spend nearly 70% of their income on food. Many are forced to leave or sell their farms to escape mounting debt. About 25% of Burma’s people live in poverty, but the rate of rural poverty is nearly twice that of urban centers. In the largely rural states, the highest poverty rate is in Mandalay at 32%, followed by Yangon at 29%, Magway at 28%, and Bago at 18.

Burma is one of the least developed nations in the world and scores low on human development indices. Among rural residents, only 65% have access to safe drinking water compared to 81% for urbanites. Access to safe drinking water in the Burman states ranges from 60% in Magway to 80% in Bago. Rural residents have less access to sanitation (77% vs. 84%) or electricity (34%...
Access to sanitation in the Burman states ranges from 75% in Magway to 83% in Yangon and Sagaing. For access to electricity, the rates range from 24% in Bago and Magway to 54% in Yangon.

The new government realizes that much of Burma’s success rests on improving the rural sector. Planned new reforms by the government include crop diversification, access to farm credit, better quality seeds, improved technology, and building factories with livable-wage jobs. For most rural Burmese, however, life remains much as it has for decades. There is no internet, little electricity, and fields are still plowed with oxen and scythes. Most struggle to meet their basic needs as they wait to see how the political reforms will play out.

Land Distribution

All lands are owned by the state in Burma. The Land Naturalization Act of 1953 recognizes some private ownership of land. But the government retains the right to confiscate any fallow lands. Land is commonly leased to a farmer who must use the land for agricultural production or risk having it seized. Few people hold legal title to their land, and about 33% of the rural population are landless peasants who work the land.

Exchange 44: Do you own this land?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Do you own this land?</th>
<th>min dee myey go paayn sin laa?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
<td>hoo keh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Exchange 45: Did you grow up here?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Did you grow up here?</th>
<th>min dee maa kyee bin daa laa?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
<td>hoo key</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

More and more farmers are losing their land to the state or military-backed groups. The new Farmland Law, enacted to protect the rights of farmers and to stop land-grabbing, has had the opposite effect by actually making it easier for land to be seized. Daily newspaper articles report that farmers are being evicted from their land, sometimes with no compensation and those who refuse to sell are subject to prosecution. Much of the land is given to those with state connections for the development of commercial farming or other business development projects.  

### Economy

Agriculture is the backbone of the nation’s economy, and most Burmans are rice farmers in the central and southern parts of Burma. Although other crops including corn, beans, sesame, potatoes, and sugarcane are also cultivated, rice is the main agricultural crop. The average farm is small averaging only about 2.5 ha (6 ac). More than 80% of cropland depends on rainfall for water with less than 20% of land being irrigated. Most cultivation relies on primitive techniques including oxen or buffalo to plow fields. Fewer than 12,000 tractors are currently in use.

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**Exchange 46: Where do you work, sir?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Where do you work, sir?</th>
<th>min beh ma aa lo lo leh?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>I am a farmer, sir.</td>
<td>ka no leh ta ma ba</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To increase income, many farmers have turned to opium production. Every year since 2006, the amount of agricultural land devoted to raising opium poppies has increased. Most opium is produced in the region known as the Golden Triangle near the borders with Laos and Thailand. Most Burmese opium farmers, however, are members of ethnic minorities. Few Burman farmers are involved in opium production.\(^{577, 578}\)

Burma’s agricultural sector has huge growth potential and is receiving a lot of attention from foreign investors anxious to cash in on the opportunities.\(^{579, 580}\) Although the government liberalized the rice market in 2003, it continues to exercise control over issues related to cultivation, production quotas, crop selection, and export policy.\(^{581}\) Access to better seeds and fertilizers could vastly increase output. New and more efficient rice mills could also improve export numbers.\(^{582, 583}\)

Burma’s livestock and fisheries are a significant part of the agricultural sector but are still recovering from the effects of Cyclone Nargis.\(^{584}\) Serious outbreaks of Avian Influenza (bird flu) occurred in 2007, 2010, and 2011. Avian Influenza is unlikely to soon be eradicated in the nation, so current efforts are focused on early detection and minimizing impacts.\(^{585}\) The fishing sector mainly exports carp, a relatively unpopular fish in the west, to Bangladesh. In addition to

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finding more popular species, the industry must find a way to resolve the serious lack of electricity that hinders the production of fish products and exports.  

**Rural Transportation**

Traveling throughout the rural areas and more remote regions of Burma presents a number of challenges. Roads are in poor condition, often riddled with potholes, and frequently unpaved. Landmines present a danger, particularly in the border regions. Outside of the cities, fewer than 10% of secondary roads operate throughout the year. All drivers are required to have a valid Burmese driver’s license. There is no roadside assistance available and no ambulance service in the event of an emergency.

**Exchange 47: Is there a gas station nearby?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Is there a gas station nearby?</th>
<th>dee naa ma da see sin shee laa?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
<td>hoo keh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Public transportation options are limited and likely to consist largely of motor-bike taxis, trishaws (*saiq-ka*), bicycles, ox carts, and horse carts (*myint hlei*). It is possible to travel by boat from village to village in some areas, but travel times are extremely slow. Limited train travel connects some of the larger towns with Yangon and Mandalay, and travel time is much longer than by road.

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Rural Healthcare

Constitutional guarantees of a right to healthcare means little to most rural Burmese who have little access to healthcare. Approximately 1,500 health centers are available for the more than 65,000 villages, which represent approximately 70% of the population. Although 75% of the rural population have some access, patients must often travel for up to one day to reach a clinic in a town. Rural healthcare clinics are staffed by a health assistant, a public health supervisor, a lady health visitor, and a midwife, but no doctors. In smaller regions, there are mini-health centers, each serving 5–10 villages, staffed with a midwife and a public health supervisor, along with unpaid volunteer health workers. This lack of access and high costs have led many rural Burmese to turn to traditional healers whose services and medicines are often free.

Exchange 48: Is there a medical clinic nearby?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Is there a medical clinic nearby?</th>
<th>dee naa ma sey koo Khaan shee laa?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Yes, over there.</td>
<td>hoo keh, ho naa ma</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Life expectancy for both men (64 years) and women (68 years) is lower in rural areas. Only 74% of births are attended by a skilled professional including a midwife (let-thare).

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Approximately 30% of Burmese children are chronically malnourished.\textsuperscript{607} Dengue fever is present throughout the nation, including largely Burman states.\textsuperscript{608} Malaria is one of the main causes of death in Burma.\textsuperscript{609, 610} Snakes are another health risk, particularly in central Burma where about 8% of snake-bite victims die. The most common snakes are the viper and cobra, for which vaccines are available, and the krait and sea snakes.\textsuperscript{611}

**Exchange 49: My arm is broken, can you help me?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>My arm is broken, can you help me?</th>
<th>naa leh mawn cho ney loo ko nee ba?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Yes, I can help you.</td>
<td>hoo keh, koo jee naay ba deh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Education in Rural Areas**

Traditionally, the Burman highly value education. With monasteries as the center of community life, literacy among the Burman has been high. Following independence, Burma’s once strong educational tradition declined. Today, national literacy rates remain high (90%) but vary significantly among rural and urban citizens (89% vs. 95% respectively).\textsuperscript{612} In Burman-dominated areas, literacy rates for both urban and rural poor are typically higher, partially reflecting the value placed on education.\textsuperscript{613}

In spite of relatively high literacy, the level of educational attainment is low.\textsuperscript{614, 615} Rural students are less likely to enter and remain in school. In Burman-dominated areas, there is an


\textsuperscript{608} Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Dengue Map,” 28 January 2013, \url{http://www.healthmap.org/dengue/index.php}


average of one school for every two villages. Approximately 11% of rural children live farther than 2 km (1 mi) from any primary school, and only 24% of rural children have access to secondary schools. Recent statistics from the United Nations report that 25% of Burmese children never enter any school and only 40% of those who do actually complete the five-year elementary schooling. Besides poor access, even though elementary education is free in Burma, many schools are forced to charge fees to augment their meager budgets. Poor families are often unable to bear the burden of school fees, which cover instruction, course materials, testing, and school sanitation. Such fees make it less likely that poor rural children will attend school or complete their education.

Exchange 50: Is there a school nearby?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier: Is there a school nearby?</th>
<th>dee naa ma kawn shee laa?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>hoo keh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Monastic schools provide increased educational access for poor and rural students. Although such students are still a small percentage of all students, monastic schools truly are free and often include room and board. These schools follow the national primary curriculum. Dropout rates in rural areas are higher than in cities, especially among minority populations. Less than 50%

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of rural students make it to the last year of elementary school.\(^{624}\) Lack of school access, inability to pay school expenses, or work obligations stop them.\(^ {625}\)

**Who’s in Charge?**

Since the new government took office in 2010, there has been a relative decentralization of power in Burma. Each of the 14 states has its own local legislature and a local government led by a chief minister appointed by the president. Each of these is further divided into townships, wards, and village tracks.\(^ {626, 627}\)

**Exchange 51: Can you take me to your leader?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Can you take me to your leader?</th>
<th>min yeh gawn saw see Khaw twaa naay ma laa?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
<td>hoo keh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Exchange 52: Does your leader live here?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Does your leader live here?</th>
<th>min yeh yaw ta jee de ma shee laa?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
<td>hoo keh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most members of these local governments belong to the government’s own Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP).\(^ {628, 629}\) Local government powers remain limited but offer the possibility for greater local accountability.\(^ {630, 631}\) Areas in which local governments have

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authority to act include allocation of land and agricultural loans, small business loans, the promotion of local culture, and municipal issues.\textsuperscript{632}

### Exchange 53: Respected leader, we need your help.

| Soldier: | Respected leader, we need your help. | ley saa ba deh, kya naw do Khin byaa aa ko aa nee go loo chin ba deh |
| Local: | Yes. | hoo keh |

## Border Crossings and Checkpoints

Land border crossings are open sporadically and subject to closure without notice.\textsuperscript{633, 634} Legal crossings are severely restricted. In January 2013, it was possible to cross into Thailand from Tachilek in Shan State and from Kaw Thoung near the southern Thai border. The border crossing into China is at Muse in Shan State while India is accessible from Tamu in Chin State. Visitors are required to enter and exit the country from the same border crossing.\textsuperscript{635}

Checkpoints are common, especially outside of the major tourist areas, and all travelers are advised to carry their passports and visa at all times.\textsuperscript{636}

### Exchange 54: Where is the nearest checkpoint?

| Soldier: | Where is the nearest checkpoint? | dee naa ma sit sey deh ney yaa shee laa? |
| Local: | It’s two miles. | naa maay law ma shee ba deh |

### Exchange 55: Is this all the ID you have?

| Soldier: | Is this all the ID you have? | min ma dee maa pon tin aa kon beh laa? |


Local: Yes. hoo keh

Police checkpoints are sometimes set up in the cities to monitor traffic and driving under the influence of drugs or alcohol. 637

Exchange 56: Please get out of the car.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Please get out of the car.</th>
<th>kyey zoo pyoo ywey kaa paw ga twet pay ba</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
<td>hoo keh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Exchange 57: Show us the car registration.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Show us the car registration.</th>
<th>kaa maa pon tin pya ba</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
<td>hoo keh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Travelers have been extorted by the Burmese military or by ethnic militant groups manning checkpoints. In June 2012, soldiers from the Kachin Independence Army closed a checkpoint run by the Burmese military that was allegedly collecting “taxes” from travelers. 638 Similar allegations against the Burmese army have been leveled in Shan State where temporary checkpoints are frequently erected. 639 Ethnic armed militias sometimes close checkpoints or set up their own throughout Burma causing tensions which occasionally erupt in violence. 640, 641, 642

Exchange 58: Are you carrying any guns?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Are you carrying any guns?</th>
<th>min thay naa dwey yoo laa ta laa?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

---

Landmines

Burma has not yet acceded to the Mine Ban Treaty but is considering doing so. In early 2012, President Thein Sein requested assistance clearing mines in the nation. Both the government and the armed ethnic groups in Burma have extensively used antipersonnel mines. The reported rate of use has diminished since the middle of 2011, perhaps in partial response to talks designed to secure peace agreements with insurgent groups.\(^{643}\) Although mine laying operations have tapered off, they still continue. In 2011 and 2012, there were several reports of mines being laid in Kayin (Karen) State. Some armed insurgent groups have the capacity to make various types of mines and antipersonnel devices. Several armed ethnic groups have failed to sign agreements with the government and remain armed and able to lay mines.\(^{644}\)

Landmines are primarily concentrated in the border areas with Bangladesh and Thailand. Eastern Burma is particularly dangerous due to years of violent interethnic conflict. Karen State and the Bago division have the heaviest contamination. All townships in Karen State and Karenni State are contaminated with mines. Significant problems are present in Kachin State, Mon State, Rakhine State, Shan State, and the Tenasserim division. New reports suggest that the border with India in the Chin State is also contaminated.\(^{645}\)

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Chapter 5 Assessment

1. The Burman are concentrated primarily in the southern and central parts of the nation.  
   True  
   The Burman are concentrated in the central and southern regions of Burma in the states of Magway, Bago, Mandalay, Yangon, and portions of Sagaing.

2. Farmers fully own the lands they farm.  
   False  
   In effect, all lands are owned by the state in Burma. The Land Naturalization Act of 1953 recognizes some private ownership of land. But the government retains the right to confiscate any fallow lands.

3. At least one-quarter of rural Burmese lack access to medical and healthcare facilities.  
   True  
   Although 75% of the rural population have some access, patients must often travel for up to one day to reach a clinic in a town.

4. Opium cultivation is on the rise among the Burman farmers as a way to increase their incomes.  
   False  
   Most opium is produced in the region known as the Golden Triangle near the borders with Laos and Thailand. Most Burmese opium farmers, however, are members of ethnic minorities. Few Burman farmers are involved in opium production.

5. Approximately 25% of Burmese children never enroll in school.  
   True  
   Recent statistics from the United Nations report that 25% of Burmese children never enter any school, and only 40% of those who do actually finish five years of elementary schooling.
Chapter 6: Family Life

Introduction

Families are a central feature of Burmese life, and ties among members are strong. Ancestral relations are important, but Burmese society does not recognize the clan. The family is the dominant social unit. The family’s significance is easily seen in the Burmese language which has words to identify up to seven generations of ancestors and words to describe seven degrees of descendants. The language includes a number of terms unfamiliar in the west that describe familial relationships and others that describe the such tangled relations.646

Although nuclear families are becoming the norm in cities, many Burman live in extended households that include three generations living under the same roof.647 Everyone is expected to do their fair share of household obligations and responsibilities. Fathers are usually distant, expressing little emotion, and remaining detached from day-to-day household affairs. Management of the household, including the budget, falls to the wife.648 Children expect their parents to be a continuing source of support, even into adulthood. Parents expect their children to be obedient and to take care of them in their old age. It is not at all uncommon for parents to live with their children for their entire lives.649

Typical Household and Family Structure

Most Burman live in an extended family setting that often includes parents, parents-in-law, grandparents, and the siblings of a spouse as well as other kin.650, 651 Nuclear families sometimes live in their own compound, but many related households may live together in their own houses within a larger compound. These individual households may then form extended family units.652

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Among the Burman, it is common for a couple to live with the wife’s family. But they are free to live with the groom’s family or on their own.  

**Exchange 60: Is this your entire family?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Is this your entire family?</th>
<th>dee ha a min mee daa zoo daa soo lo beh laa?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
<td>hoo key</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Exchange 61: Does your family live here?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Does your family live here?</th>
<th>min mee taa dea maa ney laa?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
<td>hoo key</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The typical Burman family has at least five children. Households in rural areas and cities are of roughly equal size, with rural households slightly larger. About 21% of households in the Burman states or regions are headed by females.

**Exchange 62: How many people live in this house?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>How many people live in this house?</th>
<th>dee in maa loo beh nee yaw ney ley?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Five.</td>
<td>naa yaa ney baa ley</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Status of Elders and Children

#### Status of the Elderly

The Burmese have great respect for the elderly. According to Buddhist traditions, no matter how poor a family, the elderly deserve respect and care. Younger people are taught to respect their elders and never to criticize or argue with them. Younger people must do everything

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possible to avoid causing a loss of face (status or reputation). In Burmese society, it is traditional for a parent to remain with at least one adult child who is responsible to provide care for the parent as s/he ages. In 2001, 90% of parents lived with an adult child. The elderly often provide support for the family by taking on the responsibility of childcare within the home. This continued involvement in the family and being close to relatives is an important factor in creating feelings of well-being among the elderly.

Status of Children

Children are much loved in Burmese society and often indulged. Both male and female children are regarded as family treasures. Burmese parents often feel it is luckier to have a boy, however, because boys can become monks who bring the family good karma. Boys are typically indulged and pampered much more than their sisters. Girls are raised to be demure, gentle, and quiet. They are taught to care for men and to be loving. It is inappropriate to express admiration for children because this may cause bad luck from evil spirits.

Burma’s military continues to actively recruit children into its armed forces as do some armed ethnic militias. Many boys have been forcibly recruited into the military in spite of a minimum age limit of 18 for recruitment. In June 2012, the government agreed to release all under-age soldiers from the army and border-guard forces. In spite of the agreement and the release of some children from the military, however, young boys continue to be recruited. For child soldiers

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who have been released from service, there are no rehabilitation programs or special services to reintegrate them into the community.669 The high rates of poverty also place children at risk. An estimated 18% of poor children work in factories or other industries for long hours with little pay.670 Some children become the victims of trafficking where they are forced to work as beggars or hawkers. Some are forced into the commercial sex trade, many in Thailand.671, 672, 673

Married Life, Divorce, and Birth

Marriage

The minimum age of legal marriage without parental consent is 18 for a woman. There is no specified minimum age for men.674 Although marriage is expected, many Burmese are delaying marriage or remaining single. Since 1970, the number of single women has spiked. For those 30–34 years of age, 26% were single in 2000 while the rate for those 40–44 was 15%. Approximately one-third of individuals aged 25–34 were single and never cohabitated.675 A key reason for increased singlehood is the fraying economy in Burma. Another reason is the rising rates of educational levels among some women who find it difficult to find a peer.676 Nearly 69% of women with a university degree between the ages of 25–34 were single in 2000 compared to only 20% of those with no education.677

Exchange 63: Do you have any brothers?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Do you have any brothers?</th>
<th>min maa nee koo dwey gaw shee laa?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
<td>hoo key</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

In day-to-day life, Burmese women have a degree of equality with men in both the domestic and economic spheres. Many wives work alongside their husbands or run their own businesses. The traditional Burmese family structure could be considered “matriarchal”. Women have primary responsibility for raising the children, doing domestic chores, and managing the household budget.

**Exchange 64: Are you the only person in your family who has a job?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Are you the only person in your family who has a job?</th>
<th>min mee daa soo teh maa min dee yaa yaw beh aa lo shee daa laa?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>maa hoo baa boo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Household space is divided by gender. The kitchen, always in the back of the home, is the female domain. Closet space is allocated separately because a woman’s clothing must not touch any man, including a monk’s, because it “steals” men’s power (*hpon*). Men and women’s clothes are separated for washing.

**Divorce**

Recent data for the rate of divorce in Burma is difficult to find, but based on census data from 1991, it is believed to be around 1%. Under Burmese law, marriages can be dissolved either through mutual consent of both parties or by a court. Grounds for divorce include cruelty and abuse, adultery, and desertion. Either a male or a female may initiate divorce proceedings, but a man cannot divorce his wife without reason. A woman may divorce a husband if he gives away or sells property without his wife’s consent. A couple may complete the divorce

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process by going to court, announcing that they are divorced in newspapers, or executing a deed of divorce before local elders. If a husband leaves his wife for three years without communicating or providing financial assistance, the marriage is automatically ended.

Exchange 65: Is this your wife?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Is this your wife?</th>
<th>dee haa min may maa laa?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
<td>hoo key</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Property acquired jointly is split evenly. Since community-recognized cohabitation constitutes a valid marriage, it makes no difference whether the union was registered. Normally, fathers are given custody of boys while mothers receive custody of daughters. If the children are very young, they generally live with the mother.

Birth

Children are expected to come quickly after marriage. When a woman has given birth, her friends customarily bring practical gifts, such as baby clothes. Gifts should never be given before the baby’s birth since the recipient may believe this will bring misfortune. Food is always given as gifts to monks following the birth of a child.

Families prepare a cradle with clothes in it for the newborn. Useful gender-appropriate gifts are laid around the cradle the first time the child is placed in it. If the child is a son, a learned man is called to perform a hair-washing ritual. Gold or silver coins are placed in a cup used to wash the child’s hair so that the child will grow up wealthy. When the child is a month old, the baby’s head is shaved. Hair represents bad karma from a previous life.

Postpartum (me dwin) is viewed as the time a mother is susceptible to illness, since her body is “cold” from blood loss. She is therefore given warm drinks and foods associated with “hot” properties to restore her health.


Exchange 66: Are these your children?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Are these your children?</th>
<th>dee haa min Khley dwey laa?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
<td>hoo key</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Exchange 67: Are these people part of your family?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Are these people part of your family?</th>
<th>dee loo dwey haa min mee daa zoo teh ga beh laa?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>maa hoo baa boo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Family Social Events

*Weddings*

Buddhist weddings in Burma are purely secular affairs *(lokiya)* that are not officiated by monks.⁶⁹⁸, ⁶⁹⁹ According to the Buddhist law in the nation, if a man and a woman are recognized as a couple by seven houses to the right and seven to the left, they can become husband and wife. Any distinguished couple in the community can conduct the ritual ceremony. The couple performing the ceremony should have a long and happy marriage and many children. Couples may forego such ceremonies and simply sign a marriage certificate at a registry of marriage office.⁷⁰⁰ Other couples prefer to get married in a “court marriage” conducted by a judge. Such weddings require a judge and witnesses.⁷⁰¹

Part of the ceremony includes preparing alms for the monastic community *(sangha)* as a form of giving through which the couple will accrue merit. If they are moving into their own home, monks will visit to bless it for the new residents.⁷⁰²

Following the marriage ceremony, refreshments are served. The couple greets each of their guests who offer wishes for a long and prosperous life. After the reception, the newlyweds return

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to their home where they pay respects to each of their parents who then bless the couple. Many
contemporary weddings take place in urban hotels which provide wedding packages.  

**Exchange 68: Congratulations on your wedding!**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>Congratulations on your wedding!</th>
<th>min yeh let ta min ga laa pweh go go yoo ba deh!</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>We are honored you could attend.</td>
<td>min yeh teh yaw da naa go yoo ba deh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Exchange 69: I wish you both happiness.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soldier:</th>
<th>I wish you both happiness.</th>
<th>min do nee yaw sa lon peeyo shon jaa ba sey loo soo tawn ba deh</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local:</td>
<td>We are honored.</td>
<td>min do oo go yoo ba deh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Funerals**

In the Buddhist religion, death is simply one stage in the cycle of life. There are no required mourning periods. Burmese funerals often last a week with the burial or cremation taking place on the third or fifth day following death. If the death occurs right before the Burma New Year, funerals are held as quickly as possible to avoid bringing misfortune into the new year.

When an individual dies at home, the corpse is washed, dressed in the deceased’s favorite or newest clothing, and placed on a bed decorated with lace and flowers. The body of an individual who has died in a hospital is not allowed back into the village or the street where the individual lived. Instead, it will be kept at the morgue or, in rural areas, the coffin is sometimes placed at the outskirts of the town before burial.

A large canvas tent is often erected near the family home which may hold the body and where friends and family meet. During the seven-day wake, all doors in the home stay open. Friends and family take turns watching the house during this time.

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Throughout Burma, burial is the norm but in Rangoon, cremation is more common. During the ceremony, monks recite prayers, and the deceased’s employer reads an official notice releasing the individual from work obligations.710 Family and friends give food and candles to the monks to increase merit for the deceased. Burmese believe such goodwill helps the lingering spirit of the dead person.711 It is obligatory to attend funerals in Burma. To fail to attend shows a serious lack of concern for the family. If, for some reason, one simply cannot attend a funeral, one can send another person along with a letter, telegram, or phone call.712

Exchange 71: I would like to give my condolences to you and your family.

| Soldier:   | I would like to give my condolences to you and your family. | min neh min mee taa zoo tweh naa won neh jaa pee poo lay ba deh |
| Local:     | Thank you.                                                   | tee zoo tin ba deh                                                 |

Shinbyu

One of the most important occasion in a boy’s life comes when he enters a monastery as a novice monk. Virtually all Burman males become a monk, even if only for a few days. This time is a source of great pride for parents and grandparents. Parents often prepare a feast and give money or robes to the local monks.713

A traditional ritual used to be the ear-piercing ceremony (na *htwin*), which was considered a female rite of passage equivalent to the boy’s shinbyu. Such rituals, however, have fallen out of favor in recent year. Young girls who enter a nunnery may have a novitiation ceremony similar to that for boys becoming monks.714,715

Naming Conventions

Most Burmese names contain one or two syllables which, when taken together, have a specific meaning. Some Burmese names may contain only a single syllable.716 Most Burmese have no

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surnames (family names) and, therefore, there is no need for women to change their names after marriage. Naming customs reflect historical beliefs in astrology, and a child’s name still typically reveals the day of the week when he was born. For example, a child born on “Thursday” would have one name beginning P, B, or M, the letters associated with a Thursday birth.\textsuperscript{717, 718, 719}

Sometimes, all or part of the father’s name may be included in the child’s name but rarely will one find a father and son with exactly the same name. This can be seen in the case of the famous opposition activist Aung San Suu Kyi. Her father’s complete name, Aung San, precedes her own, Suu, which is followed by part of her mother’s name, Kyi. Husbands and wives may find themselves with the same name or a reversal of the same names. For example U Tin Hla (man) may be married to Daw Hla Tin (woman). In this example, “U” and “Daw” are honorific forms of address.\textsuperscript{720}

The use of honorifics preceding a Burmese name is mandatory. Each honorific term carries information about the status and rank of a person and therefore, honorifics change throughout one’s life. The most common honorifics include Maung for a child, Ko for a young adult, U for a working adult (which also means uncle), and Saya for teachers, writers, physicians, bosses, or anyone in a responsible position. For females, the equivalent terms are Ma, Daw (which can also mean aunt), and Sayama. Individuals may further confuse the naming process by inserting the name of their hometown in front of their names. For example, U Khant, brother of former UN Secretary General U Thant, inserted his hometown before his name and is officially known as Pantanaw U Khant. A university graduate may elect to add “Tekkatho” meaning university before their name as in the example of Tekkatho Aung Thein.\textsuperscript{721, 722, 723}

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{716} Donald M. Seekins, \textit{The A to Z of Burma (Myanmar)} (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2006), 317–318.
\textsuperscript{719} Donald M. Seekins, \textit{The A to Z of Burma (Myanmar)} (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2006), 317.
\textsuperscript{721} Donald M. Seekins, \textit{The A to Z of Burma (Myanmar)} (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2006), 318.
\end{footnotesize}
Chapter 6 Assessments

1. Nuclear families have replaced extended families as the most common family structure. **False**
   Many Burman live in an extended family setting that often includes parents, parents-in-law, grandparents, and the siblings of a spouse and other kin.

2. There is little difference in the size of urban and rural households. **True**
   The typical Burman family has at least five children. Rural households are roughly the same size as urban ones, with rural ones slightly larger.

3. It is common for newlyweds to move in with the groom’s parents. **False**
   Among the Burman, it is common for a couple to live with the wife’s family but they are free to live with the groom’s family or on their own.

4. The divorce rate in Burma is low. **True**
   Recent data for the rate of divorce in Burma is difficult to find, but based on census data from 1991, it is believed to be around 1%.

5. The legal age for marriage for men and women is 18. **False**
   The minimum age of legal marriage without parental consent is 18 for a woman. There is no specified minimum age for men.
FINAL ASSESSMENT

1. Freedom of the press in Burma is severely restricted.  
   True / False

2. Burma has few natural resources.  
   True / False

3. The largest minority ethnic group in Burma is the Mon.  
   True / False

4. The president is directly elected by the people.  
   True / False

5. The Central Basin and Lowlands region contains Burma’s major hydrocarbon basins.  
   True / False

6. Theravada is the most liberal form of the religion.  
   True / False

7. Women in a pagoda should not attempt to speak with a monk.  
   True / False

8. The one major religious holiday observed by Burman is the Shwedagon Festival.  
   True / False

9. Burman often begin their day with a prayer.  
   True / False

10. Buddhist clergy often run for political office.  
    True / False

11. Both men and women frequently use a handshake when greeting others.  
    True / False

12. Burman women have little control of household finances.  
    True / False

13. Honorifics should be used with a person’s name in order to show respect and to be polite.  
    True / False
14. The Burmese have three different calendars which they use to mark time. 
   True / False

15. It is appropriate to eat from a fork. 
   True / False

16. Approximately 75% of residents have no access to electricity. 
   True / False

17. Healthcare access in most of the nation’s cities is adequate. 
   True / False

18. The person who invites guests to a restaurant is normally expected to pay for everyone’s meals. 
   True / False

19. It is inappropriate to bargain unless one actually intends to buy an item. 
   True / False

20. Access to ATM machines is extremely limited even in major cities. 
   True / False

21. Local leaders, including the chief minister, are elected by the population. 
   True / False

22. The most heavily mined regions of Burma are along its borders with Bangladesh and Thailand. 
   True / False

23. Nearly two-thirds of rural Burmese have no access to electricity. 
   True / False

24. Approximately half of Burmese farmers are landless peasants. 
   True / False

25. Burmese agriculture is heavily dependent on irrigation. 
   True / False

26. Buddhist weddings are secular. 
   True / False

27. The normal mourning period following the death of a relative is two weeks.
True / False
28. Burman family names (surnames) precede the given name.
   **True / False**

29. Parents often live with their children throughout their lives.
   **True / False**

30. Nearly one in five children from poor families works in factories or other industries.
   **True / False**
FURTHER READINGS AND RESOURCES


