

## GEOGRAPHY AND DEMOGRAPHICS:

Kawthoolei, located in Myanmar, which is in Southeast Asia, is the aspirational free state of the Karen people. There is an official Karen State that rests in eastern Myanmar on the Thai border, but this only means a large population of Karen live there. They have no independence. The Karen National Union has sometimes said that virtually all the land in Myanmar's peninsula should also be part of the aspirational state of Kawthoolei. Many Karen also reside in the nine main refugee camps that run along the border of Thailand and Myanmar, and even make up the majority of the (roughly) 128,000 inhabitants of those camps. Kawthoolei has some mountainous areas and is heavily forested, with some places cleared for agriculture and housing. The Karen people are an ethnic group in and of themselves, but there are also many different sub-groups, such as the Pa-O or Black Karen and the Kayah, or Red Karen. Many of these groups of Karen have cultural similarities. The main separating factor seems to be their three main languages, which are S'ghaw, Western Pwo Karen and Eastern Pwo Karen. There are also distinct accents that can make it difficult for speakers of the same language to communicate. S'ghaw is the most common language, and many people throughout the region speak it, including Thai people. However, the Pwo languages are less well-known; a Pwo Karen could probably speak S'ghaw, but a S'ghaw Karen might not be able to speak Pwo.

## IMMIGRATION

Kue May's immigration experience was mainly influenced by the Refugee Act of 1980, which was created as a result of the growing number of refugees displaced by the Vietnam War. Before the Act, legislation for admitting refugees was primarily done on a case by case basis and, as a result of the huge influx from Vietnam, Congress realized that there needed to be a more centralized and forgiving system. The Act raised the maximum number of refugees admitted per year from 17,400 to 50,000, but it also made it possible for the President to raise it even more in an emergency, such as a humanitarian crisis. The Act also created a standardized definition of a refugee: to be considered a refugee, one has to prove that they have a legitimate reason for being unable to return to their home country for fear of persecution for their religion, gender, race, national origin or membership to a particular social group. Obviously, Kue May met several of these requirements. Another thing that largely affected her immigration was being helped by an Overseas Processing Entity (OPE) in the Thai refugee camp. An OPE is an entity funded by the Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration. Its job is to prepare a refugee's paperwork for Homeland Security, and, upon its acceptance, get a resettlement agency to sponsor the refugee in coming to the US. These sponsorships do not usually come from a governmental body, but instead from an embassy, or non-profit organization.

## CLOTHING

Traditional Sgaw and Pwo Karen make their clothing out of cotton they spin and weave themselves, and this has been practiced for a very long time. Some common colors for this weaving would be blue, black and red, as can be seen in Kue May's picture where she is wearing traditional clothing. Although traditional clothing is still worn quite a lot, mass-produced tee-shirts and blue jeans have also become a fairly normal attire, especially if people are visiting, or live in, a major city. Some Karen also wear mass-produced traditional-style clothing. There are certain clothing norms specific to certain groups: For example, the Kayah (Red Karen) earned their name because their cloth is usually dyed bright red, whereas the Pa-O (Black Karen) wear primarily black clothing. It's also very common to see Karen attire decorated with elaborate embroidery made from brightly colored thread and beads made out of seeds. Homemade jewelry is also common, as many Karen women wear beaded necklaces and/or silver bracelets on their arms. In certain groups it is customary for unmarried Karen women to wear a long, single-piece dress which is sometimes white; once they are married, some women will start to wear a two-piece outfit consisting of a short sleeved shirt and a sarong.

## RELIGION

The Karen people have three main religions: Buddhism, Christianity, and Animism. There are also two other religions called Lehkai and Telahkon, but they are not practiced as much as the other three. It is more common for the Sgaw Karen to be Christian and the Pwo Karen to be Buddhist, but this didn't happen randomly; Christianity was not native to the Karen people, and missionaries from the US had tried to convert them for a very long time, but didn't actually succeed until the 1800s. The missionaries realized that Sgaw Karen were easier to convert than the Pwo Karen, and this is most likely because the Pwo Karen had recently been converted to Buddhism. It is also said that many Karen legends held similarities to Christianity, and if these legends were more specific to the Sgaw Karen, it could be another contributing factor in their conversion. Animism has been practiced by the Karen people before Buddhism or Christianity, and many Karens mix Animist beliefs with their Buddhist beliefs. Animism is the belief that all -things possess some form of spirit or life-force, even down to a stone or a tree.

## COLONIALISM

In the 19th century, the British began to take an interest in the Burmese region. In 1824, the British attacked Burma in a series of conflicts known as the Anglo-Burmese Wars, which resulted in the British colonization of Burma in 1885. Many Karen people fought on the side of the British during these wars, partly because of their conversion to Christianity by the Americans, and partly because they saw it as a way to get out from under Burmese rule. This allegiance further soured their relationship with Burma. Burma was a province of British-ruled India until 1937 when it became its own separate colony. When WWII started, the Burmese saw it as a way to finally gain independence from the British, and so, with an army led by Aung San, the future leader, they fought with the Japanese and helped take the Burmese Capital, Rangoon (now Yangon), in 1942. The Karen people continued to fight primarily with the British. The Burmese quickly realized that living under Japanese rule wasn't better than living under the British, so they switched again and helped the British retake control of Burma. In 1947, following the end of WWII, now leader Aung San, was assassinated, and U Nu rose to power, creating a Burmese-dominated, sovereign government. In 1948, Burma declared independence, but the Karen people and other ethnic groups were not given their own independence.

## GOVERNMENTAL REPRESENTATION

The Karen National Union (KNU) is the main political body representing the Karen people. It was created in 1947 and was a consolidation of four separate Karen organizations. The KNU also possesses an armed security wing called the Karen National Defence Organization (KNDO) which was founded in the same year, and an army called the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) founded in 1950. In the same year the KNU was founded, Burma Nationalist leader, Aung San, called the Panglong Conference. Its outcome was an agreement for a federal democratic union independent from Britain. The KNU did not attend because they wanted complete independence, not a federal union. They did think their interests would be represented, though, because Karen organizations had been negotiating independence from Britain since 1923, and the purpose of the conference was a federal union where ethnic nationalities' interests would be represented. However, shortly after the Panglong Conference, Aung San was assassinated and U Nu came into power, changing the agreement, and creating the Sovereign Union of Burma where all other ethnicities were absorbed. The KNU's goals have changed slightly over the years, but their purpose has always been the well-being and independence of the Karen people. Since their creation in 1947 on until 1976, their goal was complete independence for Kawthoolei, meaning it would become its own country, separate from Burma. But since 1976, the KNU has sought to create a federal union in Burma, with Kawthoolei being a state with its own independence and recognized government.

## WAR

In 1948, following Burma's independence, violence prevailed; however, there was a brief point when the Karen and the Burmese leaders tried to create peace. U Nu, the leader of Burma, and Saw Ba U Gyi, the Karen leader, agreed to send Karen soldiers to overtake the Twante Canal from communist rebels. The leaders hoped this would provide peace, but the newspapers portrayed it as the "Karen insurgency" because the violence of taking the canal resembled that from earlier in the year. Time passed, tensions rose and people began to fight until all out war was declared by the Karen National Union in 1949. Its four demands were roughly: 1. No surrender. 2. Recognize The Karen State. 3. We keep our arms. 4. We have the right to live our own lives. In 1962 there was a coup d'état led by Ne Win (U Nu's general) which resulted in the entire country coming under the rule of a Junta. In the 70s, retired President Ne Win still held power and wanted to create a Burmese majority in the country to beat the ethnic groups fighting for independence. To do this he created the Four Cuts Policy, which was meant to "cut off" the Karen (and other ethnic groups') access to food, funds, information and recruitment. Even with the changes in government over the years and various attempts at peace talks and ceasefires, for all intents and purposes the war between the Karen and the Burmese still goes on today.

## US INVOLVEMENT

During WWII, the US allied with the British and assisted in various battles fought in Burma. After independence in 1948, the Burmese dictatorships and human rights violations produced tense relations with the US, particularly through the 90s, when the US and the EU imposed economic sanctions. Later in the 90s, they relaxed some sanctions, such as allowing their own petroleum corporations into the country. The Junta of Myanmar during this time, known as the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), was responsible for committing many human rights violations. The US and EU oil companies were accused of being involved in these human rights violations. Many victims sued Unocal (the US oil company) and got a multimillion dollar settlement in 2005. In the 2000s the relations between the US and Burma thawed a bit, mainly due to the military Junta (SLORC) being replaced by a nominally democratic government in 2011. In the same year, as a result of this shift towards democracy, then US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton visited Burma and met with its then President, U Thein Sein, and the leader of the Democratic party who also played a large role in dismantling the Junta, Suu Kyi (daughter of Aung San). Clinton discussed loosening the sanctions and reintegrating Burma with modern national society. The two countries obtained normal political relations in 2012, however, the extensive human rights violations against the Karen and other ethnic groups still persist to this day.