

# Burmese Culture & Foods

Country of Origin: Burma (Myanmar)

Primary Language(s): Burmese, Karen, English

Percent of Iowa's Population: <1%<sup>9</sup>

## Where Are We From?



## Historical Background

The ethnic origins of Myanmar, known formally as Burma, are a combination of the Indo-Aryans, who came into the area around 700 B.C, and the Mongolian invaders, who pushed into the region in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. In 1886, after three wars with the British East India Company, Burma was annexed to India and then became a separate colony in 1937. On January 4, 1948, Burma became independent.

In 1962, Ne Win staged a coup, banned political opposition, suspended the constitution and introduced the “Burmese way of socialism.” In 1987, the Burmese people held massive demonstrations, which were brutally suppressed by the State Law and Order Council (SLORC). Then, in 1989, the military government officially changed the name of the country to Myanmar. However, many world governments rejected the name change.

In May of 1990, the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) had an overwhelming win, but the SLORC refused to recognize the results. The leader of the opposition, Aung San Suu Kyi, won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991, which then focused world attention on SLORC’s repressive policies.

In January of 2011, the country’s first parliament in 20 years convened and elected Prime Minister Thein Sein as president. The military junta officially disbanded in March of 2011, however, parliament was still largely military and former members of the junta. Still, President Sein initiated strong changes that loosened the grip the authoritarian junta held on the country.<sup>1</sup> In 2015, the NLD won an absolute majority of seats in both chambers of the Burmese Parliament and in 2016, Htin Kyaw was elected as the first non-military president of the country since the Military coup of 1962. Aung San Suu Kyi assumed role of State Counsellor. Although they are no longer the subject of a dictatorship, the military remains powerful in politics. Political turmoil, a crumbling economy and ethnic conflict are making the transition to democracy hard. Burma is home to the world’s longest-running civil war.<sup>2</sup>



**Mohinga** is one of the country’s most popular dishes. It is a fish-based soup made with rice noodles and usually contains garlic, onion, lemongrass and ginger.<sup>3</sup>

There are four species of fish that are typically used to prepare this: ngajji or ngakhu (both are kinds of small water catfish), ngapali (snakehead fish) and tilapia.<sup>3</sup>

## Traditions, Customs, & Taboos

About 90% of the population are Buddhists. Burmese follow the Theravada form of Buddhism, where it is up to each individual to “seek salvation and achieve nirvana”. The Burmese and other Buddhists follow the Buddhist custom of not touching a person on the head as it is disrespectful, because spiritually this is considered the highest part of the body. Touching a child’s head is also said to be dangerous to their well-being. People should also not point feet at each other, as this is the lowest part of the body and seen as rude.<sup>4</sup>

Both men and women do agricultural work. Many handcrafts are made within the household. Items made of metal, wood or stone are typically made by men, whereas woven items are done by women.<sup>4</sup>

## Holidays & Celebrations

The most important public holiday in Burma is Thingyan; the Burmese New Year Water Festival, which is mid—April. This is a Buddhist festival celebrated over a 4-5 day period.<sup>5</sup>

Other important holidays are Independence Day (Jan 4<sup>th</sup>), Union Day, Peasant Day, Armed Forces Day, Workers’ Day and Christmas.<sup>5,6</sup>

The Burmese love theater and festivals and have several throughout the year. During these festivals, entire towns take part. Full Moon Days are celebrated every month and many major Buddhist holidays are linked to these.<sup>6</sup>

## Education and Literacy

Education in Burma is only compulsory for five years; only 50% of Burma’s children are enrolled in secondary education. Parents are asked to pay an annual fee, and the fee is even higher in secondary schools. Girls are often more affected by these costs; parents are more likely to keep the boys in school and take the girls out if there is limited funding.<sup>7</sup> Education is marginalized and inaccessible in Burma, so young people often move to neighboring countries to attend school and university.<sup>7</sup>

The literacy rate was 75.6% in 2016.<sup>8</sup>

# Burmese Culture & Foods

## Health Disparities

Burma is a grade three level of concern to the World Health Organization (WHO), meaning multiple, major events have affected public health there.<sup>9</sup>

Infant mortality is currently 35.8 deaths/1,000 live births.<sup>10</sup> AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria continue to pose major health challenges.<sup>11</sup>

However, The Myanmar Ministry of Health are working on improving the healthcare system and have set a goal to have universal health coverage by 2030.<sup>9,11</sup>

## Traditional Foods & Meal Patterns

Sharing food and having feasts are an important part of traditional, agricultural and religious rites. Burmese typically eat a morning and evening meal and then snack throughout the day. Tea is a huge staple in the diet, served both at meals and throughout the day. Meals are served on a low table or a large platter and families sit around it on mats.<sup>12</sup> Traditionally, people eat with their hands, rarely using silverware.<sup>13</sup>

Rice is a staple in Burmese meals and is typically served with soup, fish, vegetables and a tea leaf salad. Fruit is commonly eaten after the main meal.<sup>12</sup>

## Considerations for WIC

- Keep in mind when getting a child's weight and length that most Burmese people are Buddhist and it is considered "dangerous" and rude to touch a child's head.<sup>17</sup>
- Dinners in Burma are typically served with juice, tea or water and it is not custom to drink alcohol with meals.<sup>12</sup>
- Diners begin to eat only after all food is placed on the table.<sup>13</sup>
- Since rice is such a huge staple in their diet, make sure to point out the brown rice they can get with their WIC benefits.<sup>13</sup>
- Buddhists consider the feet the lowest part of the body. It is considered rude to point your feet at someone and shoes are always taken off before entering building. Most offices in Burma are shoe-free.<sup>14</sup>
- Women are not to be touched. If she wants to shake hands with a man, she will offer her hand first.<sup>17</sup>
- The norm for greeting in Burma is a slight bow, not a handshake.<sup>17</sup>

## *What's the Iowa Connection?*

Refugees from Burma have come to settle in Iowa, and are finding jobs in manufacturing, hotel and hospitality and meatpacking industries. Tyson and JBS have been a large draw for the Burmese refugees.<sup>14</sup>

Ethnic Minorities of Burma Advocacy and Resource Center (EMBARC) was founded in 2011 and was originally for helping refugees from Burma settle in Iowa.

They continue to do that today, but in 2016 they expanded to serve other new refugee groups as well from Congo, Syria and Eritrea.<sup>15</sup>

## *How are we Living?*

Most Burmese households have two or three kids. Traditionally, several generations and extended family lived in the same household. This is still common in rural areas, but in urban areas there are now many households with just parents and the kids. Most children continue to live at home with their parents until they are married and then may stay in the wife's family home for a year after marriage before moving out together.<sup>16</sup>

