



Burmese in the New York Metro Area

ALL PEOPLES INITIATIVE LAST UPDATED: 01/2010

QUICK FACTS:

Place of Origin:

Myanmar (formerly called Burma)

Significant Subgroups:

Burman (65%); Chin (10%); Rakhine (10%); Karen (5%); Mon (5%); Kachin (5%)

Location in Metro New York:

Queens (Jackson Heights, Sunnyside, Woodside, Elmhurst); Brooklyn (Homecrest, Sunset Park)

Population in Metro New York:

12,000 (Community Estimate)

Primary Religion:

Theravada Buddhism

Secondary Religion:

Christianity (evangelical)

Status of Christian Witness:

Greater than or equal to 10% evangelical.

Primary Language:

Burmese

Secondary Languages:

Chin, Karen, Mon, Jingpho/Kachin, Arakanese/Rakhine

Registry of Peoples Codes:

101776, 106013, 108886, 104372, 200170

Significant Notes:

The military junta changed the country's name from Burma to Myanmar in 1989. Although the name change has sparked political reactions, "Burma" is essentially just a colloquial form of "Myanmar," with both referring to Burmans, the largest ethnic group in the country.

A common sight at rallies for Burma are flags bearing the likeness of Burmese pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who has spent 11 of the last 20 years under house arrest.⁶

Myanmar Baptist Church in Queens holds an ethnic "Fun Fair" every August, which receives a lot of publicity.

Noted author Salman Rushdie was among several prize-winning writers who stood alongside Burmese monks in September 2008, addressing a crowd of 650 New Yorkers gathered to mark the anniversary of the Saffron Revolution—an uprising in Myanmar (formerly known as Burma), named for the color of the monks' robes.¹ Since 1962, after a century of British colonial rule and wartime occupation by the Japanese, Myanmar has been controlled by oppressive socialist military regimes, which have impoverished the once-prosperous nation. In September 2007, distressed by the government's decision to burden its people with an astronomical hike in the price of fuel, Burmese monks began protesting with a simple act: Turning over their alms bowls, they denied military leaders the opportunity to give offerings and gain the blessing of Buddha. Soon after, the monks took to the streets, joined by thousands of Burmese citizens. The standoff lasted for nine days until the military opened fire, killing several people. Although Metro New York's Burmese community is not large—around 12 thousand people—it has well-organized associations and support from celebrities who keep Myanmar's struggle for democracy in the public eye.² Rallies and protests at the United Nations occur several times a year. Myanmar is one of the world's most ethnically diverse countries, with eight main groups and 130 subgroups. Metro New York's Burmese population consists of Burmans (the majority group), Rakhine, and Mon, who originate in Myanmar's lowlands, along with Karen, Chin, and Kachin from the hill areas.



Photo by Kristine Endsley

When Did They Come to New York?

A few Burmese students, professors, and professionals came to Metro New York following the military takeover in 1962. However, the majority are refugees who have come since the late 1990s after spending many years in refugee camps in Thailand and Malaysia. Recent US policy changes led to a wave of arrivals in 2006 that is expected to continue for several years.

Where Do They Live?

As newcomers to Metro New York, Burmese have yet to form a distinct ethnic neighborhood. Rather, they are clustered in neighboring communities in Queens, including Jackson Heights, Sunnyside, Woodside, and Elmhurst, as well as Homecrest and Sunset Park in Brooklyn.³ "Because of the high cost of living, many refugees who initially resettled in New York leave after a few months," explained Reverend Maw, a Burmese pastor in Queens. "They go to Burmese enclaves around the country like Rochester, New York; Indianapolis, Indiana; and Amarillo, Texas."

What Do They Believe?

"Buddhism is deeply rooted in the Burmese people," said Reverend Maw. In fact, Burmese pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi referred to Theravada Buddhism as "the single greatest factor affecting Burmese culture and civilization."⁴ Theravada is the world's oldest surviving Buddhist sect and the main Buddhist sect in Southeast Asia. It emphasizes the individual's ability and responsibility to end the wearisome cycle of cravings that lead to suffering and disappointment. It is believed that suffering can be eliminated through the adjustment of one's mind, which can be done through obtaining wisdom, living ethically, and concentrating on Buddha's Eightfold Path, leading to Awakening. The religious affiliations of Burmese typically fall along ethnic lines. For example, Burmans, Rakhine, and Mon are almost exclusively Buddhist. Karen are approximately seventy percent Christian and thirty percent Buddhist or animist. As a result of strong missionary outreach in the early 1900s, almost all Chin and most Kachin are evangelical Christians.⁵ Currently, Queens has two evangelical churches led by Burmese pastors. There are also several Theravada Buddhist temples in Queens, in addition to the American Burma Buddhist Association meditation centers in Brooklyn and New Jersey.

What Are Their Lives Like?

"I tell new arrivals the faster they learn to speak English, the quicker they'll get a job, and life in the US will be a lot easier," said Pastor Matu, whose church is active in refugee ministry in Queens. After spending years as refugees, most Burmese coming to Metro New York have little education, English skills, and work experience. Because of this, they receive assistance from refugee resettlement agencies, churches, and Buddhist temples to find housing and jobs.

How Can I Pray?

∞ Burmese Buddhists seek to eliminate suffering through good deeds to reach Awakening. Pray that Christians will point them to a Savior whose suffering assures believers of eternal life.

1. "Writers Commemorate Burmese Uprisings; Rally for Jailed Writers," PEN American Center, September 24, 2008, <http://www.pen.org/viewmedia.php/prm-MID/2842/prmID/1331> (accessed January 15, 2010).
2. Population estimate derived from interviews with local Burmese pastors. A representative from the Myanmar American Association gave a much higher, and probably inflated, estimate of 35,000 in Metro New York.
3. Fernanda Santos, "Fearing for Many at Home, City's Burmese Unite to Aid Cyclone Victims," *The New York Times*, May 11, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/11/nyregion/11burmese.html> (accessed January 19, 2010).
4. Amy Cooper, "Burmese Americans," in Robert Dassanowsky and Jeffrey Lehman, eds., *Gale Encyclopedia of Multicultural America*, vol. 1 (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale Group, 2000), 303.
5. Donald A. Ranard and Sandy Barron, eds., *Refugees from Burma: Their Backgrounds and Refugee Experiences* (Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics, 2007), 9, 31, 52, 62, 63.
6. British Broadcasting Corporation, "Profile: Aung San Suu Kyi," <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/1950505.stm> (accessed January 15, 2010).