



BRYCS Parenting Conversations: Klee Thoo, a Burmese Karen Father

On January 16, 2007, Klee Thoo,^[1] met with BRYCS staff to talk about his life and experiences as a Karen refugee from Burma, now raising a family with his wife in the United States.

Family Background and History:

My name is Klee Thoo and I am 31 years old. I am ethnic Karen from Burma, and I have been in the U.S. since May of 2004. I live with my wife, my six-year-old daughter, my three-year-old son and my three-month-old infant. My father, my teenage sister who is blind, and my stepmother, stepbrother, and stepsister just arrived in the U.S. two months ago. I have one brother who still lives in a refugee camp in Thailand. He has a second refugee interview this month, and we hope that he and his family will join us here soon.

I grew up in the countryside in the Karen area of Burma. We didn't have daycare, traffic, tall buildings, higher education, or a good hospital. My thinking in Burma was very narrow. When I moved to Thailand—and now to the U.S.—my focus grew wider. My father was a subsistence farmer. We grew corn, tomatoes, cucumbers, and pumpkins. We also grew rice, which the Karen people say we cannot live without. If we needed money for something, we would raise cows or pigs to sell in Thailand. I finished high school in my hometown, and for two years I taught village children up to the age of 16.

On February 27, 1997, when I was about 20 years old, the Karen people began fleeing towards Thailand, because the Burmese army came and took over our area. We had to run like animals and many people were killed. We sought refuge in the forest and eventually went to live in the Than Him refugee camp in Thailand, where I lived for seven years. Many Karen people fled to the forest in Thailand, but they did not move to the refugee camp. About one year later, it became very difficult to get into the refugee camps. You had to register with UNHCR to get a "TH" registration number. People who could not register and get a "TH" number remained in the forest

During that time, I was the main provider for my father, younger brother and younger sister. My mother had died the year before we fled Burma. She got sick with some kind of stomach pain, but we still do not know what illness she had. It would have taken two days to walk to the hospital, so we were not able to get medical care for her. My father became so upset after her death that I took over caring for the family. My younger sister was born with cataracts, but she was not able to have surgery as a child, so now she is blind. She can dress herself, and she is learning Braille, but we need to set things out for her, like food and clothing. My father has become her primary caretaker. He also studies English.

I married when I was 25. I met my wife near the refugee camp. She and her family were refugees also, but they lived in the Thai countryside. It is difficult to get a Thai identification card, but her family managed to get one. It is not citizenship, but it is something which shows the Thai police that you are legal. Otherwise, if the Thai police catch you, you can go to jail. Some Thai people lie to refugees—asking for payment and saying that they will secure you an identification card—but then the refugees never see them again.

Rumors About the U.S.

My wife's parents are still in Thailand. They say they don't want to come to the U.S. because of what they have heard about life here—that husbands and wives work so hard that they never see each other; that when you die your family cannot see your dead body; that there are tornadoes, car accidents, crime; that buildings fall down; that learning a new language is hard.

Before I came to the U.S., I had heard that people here use childcare, that you have to work hard, that you cannot hit your children and you have to treat your children with respect; and if your children do not want to do what you want them to do, you have to try something else or encourage them in different ways. I was a little afraid also when I first arrived. If you don't have a friend to take you to the store, you are going to be hungry. It was so very difficult when I first arrived. I went to ESL classes and after a few months my ear was opened a little and I understood more, so I am learning everyday. I also heard, before coming here, that education in the U.S. goes so high that you can go to the moon, and that people listening to a good singer would feel so moved that they would fall down. Mostly I heard good things, not bad things.

There are some refugees who are afraid to come to the U.S. They want to hide in the forest until they die. This is not just a generational difference—some older people want to come to the U.S., and some younger people want to remain as refugees. In some families it is a problem, because one spouse wants to be resettled in the U.S., while the other spouse wants to remain in Thailand. Some families just want their children to come to the U.S. But we cannot go back to Burma, or they will kill us.

Hopes and Fears for Children in the U.S.

Since I became a father in 2000, I have met a lot of problems that I have had to solve by myself. Here, I have to drive my children to school, set up appointments, take the children to the hospital, etc. I have to fight with the language everyday, because my wife can't speak English at all.

Here, my children enjoy going to the zoo, playing games from school on the computer, eating hamburgers, and going to the library. My hopes for their future are that my daughter will earn a Ph.D., that my son will become a bank manager, and that my baby would become a top social worker. Someday, their English will be better than mine.

Something I worry about is the teenage years, when a lot of bad things can happen. I need to train them well. In Karen culture, there are teen years, but you are under your parents' control. There is not a period of independence like here.

Reward, Greetings

When my children do a good job at something, I will buy a present for them. It would be more typical in Karen culture to give something, than to praise through words. For instance, in school in Burma, a clever student would be rewarded by eating with the teacher at a party, but a student who was not doing well would not be invited to eat with the teacher. We do not show affection in the same way as here. When you come home and see your children, you wouldn't hug them.

Here, when someone asks, "How are you?" it is hard to answer, and hard to look them in the eyes. In Burma, a typical greeting would be "Good morning, Grandma," not, "How are you?"

Discipline, Schooling

Some parenting differences between Burma and the U.S. are that in Burma, many parents beat their children with a stick if the child does not listen to you. This can cause the children to become afraid of older people. So here, it is a wonderful thing for me because I have to use my good ideas to teach my children. We don't use the stick anymore for discipline.

I help my children with their homework, set up their appointments, drive them to school, etc. Initially, I had registered my daughter at a public school with bussing, but there was a mix-up with the placement center, so she ended up at our neighborhood school, for which there is not bussing. I carpool with another family, who picks the children up in the afternoon, but it would be easier for us if they were bussed.

Here, even if you are young or old, you can share your ideas, but in my hometown, if you're younger, mostly they will use the older people's ideas.

When I was young, it took me one hour to walk to school. We didn't have a lot of teachers because it took a long time to get a teacher. The teacher might have only finished a high school education. When a student did something wrong, the teacher would hit the student with a stick, so little children would become afraid of the teacher. Here in my children's school, it is different.

Daycare

We don't have daycare in Thailand and Burma. You leave your children with older siblings, or with a friend, but mostly mothers stay at home with the children. If I needed help with harvesting, I would ask a neighbor for help, and then I would help them in return. We do not pay each other money.

When I arrived here, I had to take a test of my English ability. It was a multiple-choice test, and it was easy to just circle answers. In Burma, we would have to memorize a whole book; it was a lot of memorizing. Someday, if I go back to Burma as a teacher, I am going to use this testing method of short, multiple-choice answers.

Here in the U.S., eye contact is very important, but in Karen culture you don't look someone in the eye so much, especially with elders. In Burma if you see someone you don't know, you would not say hi, but here you talk to others even if you do not know them.

Names

Naming is also different; it is not a source of pride for Karen people. When a baby is born, I will look at the child's face and then name the child. A child might be called (in Karen) "circle face" because she has a round face, and this will become the child's name. There are no doctors or birth certificates at birth, because it is in the countryside or jungle, so naming is less formal. I chose a different name for myself when I registered as a refugee with UNHCR. It is common to have just a one-word name. Before coming to the U.S., my name was just one word, but here the one word was divided into three parts, so now I have a first, middle and last name. Someone with a good education might use a name from the Bible, or the name of a famous person.

We do not have family last names, like in the U.S. For instance, my children do not have a common last name—one has a Karen name, one has an English name about the day he was born, and the baby who was born in the U.S. has an English name that we chose because we liked it.

Back home, we would never call elders by their names. Instead we would call them only by a title—like "Auntie," or "Grandfather," or "Teacher"—as a sign of respect. So, most Karen people will not recognize someone by name, especially if you only ever referred to that person as "Grandfather." Instead, you would ask about others, or recognize others, by describing where they lived or their family relationship. It was difficult here for me to call an older person by their name. I work with the elderly, but now I am used to calling them by their names.

Employment

My first job in the U.S. was working at a hotel as a housekeeper. I worked there for five months, but I had to take two busses and the transportation was very difficult for me, especially in winter. After I quit that job, I studied more English and enrolled in a two-month nursing assistant class at the International Institute of Minnesota. I completed that program and have received a certificate from the State of MN as a nursing assistant. For the past five months I have been working at a local retirement community for the elderly.

I have evening shifts, working seven days during a two-week period (0.7 FTE). I would like to work full-time, if I could. I have also learned to drive a car here, and my wife has her learner's permit.

My wife works part-time as a personal care attendant. She has taken some time off since our daughter's birth, but she will go back to work soon. We work different shifts, in order to take care of our children.

Family Roles

For couples where the husband does not speak English, the wife still asks the husband for advice. There is more responsibility for husbands. There are the same opportunities and rights for husbands and wives, but it is a little different—the husband has the final say.

Our family roles have changed a little bit in the U.S. In Burma, husbands did not help with the housework, but here both of us can wash dishes or clean the house. I help with cooking, laundry, taking care of the kids, but in some families mostly the wife does it. In my hometown, the man is the head of the house, but here it seems like the woman is the head of the house.

Education, Careers

The grand, wonderful thing for me is to get an education. After that, it is getting a job.

I tried to enroll in college here, but my English is not good enough yet. In Thailand, I did not study the Thai language, but after seven years of living there I could read, write and understand Thai. After living in the U.S. for seven years—and studying English formally—I will see if my English is better than my Thai, since I also lived in Thailand for seven years. When my family is more established, I would like to go back to school to study social work. Someday, if I have the opportunity, I would like to go back to Burma, but I would be a teacher there. In my home area, there are no social workers.

The Karen Community

When I arrived in 2004, there were only about 100 Karen here in Minnesota. Today there are about 500. We are trying to build a community through Karen Community of Minnesota. This organization is not yet state funded, but there are three Karen staff persons working with Vietnamese Social Services. I also volunteer to help newly arriving Karen refugees, such as teaching them about using the phone, going to the store, food stamp cards, opening a bank account, getting a driver's permit, getting driving directions, going to the Social Security office, etc. When my brother comes, I will advise him about what to wear to a job interview and how to explain your qualifications, looking people in the face, going early for an interview, dressing neat and clean, etc.

Religion

My family is Baptist. There is a Baptist church here in St. Paul where many Karen people attend the English service on Sunday mornings, and then a smaller service in Karen. In 1949, the Karen people started a revolution in Burma. In 1995, the Karen divided into two groups—the Christians and the Buddhists. Some of the Buddhist Karen sided with the Burmese government against the Christian Karen, and the government used this difference to divide us further.

Karen Values, American Values

Important values from Karen culture that I want to pass on to my children include respect for elders, teachers and parents, even if you are a teenager. In Karen culture, if children don't show respect, people will say that it is a bad family, that you are not teaching your kids to respect others. For Karen people who have been here for several years, their kids are not showing respect to elders. They begin acting like American kids and calling people by their name rather than their title.

New values that I like here are independence. When a teenager is over 18, they think for themselves without their mother taking care of them, they can live by themselves. This is a wonderful thing, but Karen youth cannot stay by themselves—they don't use their own ideas; they need their parents' help. Here, youth over 18 years old are independent and can take care of themselves. If my kids can live and work by themselves, I will be happy.

Also, here you can become anything you want—a doctor, a mechanic, a banker—anything you want, if you try. In Burma, we don't have opportunities like that. In Thailand, if you wanted to become a nurse, you would have to go to school and then you would have to be tall—165 cm. If you're short, like me, they will throw your application out. Here, if you're small but you're clever, you can do anything you like. People here, even if they're blind, they can write stories on the computer and become a millionaire. In the Karen area of Burma, if you want to be a teacher, but you don't have the money to study, you have to quit.

If I hadn't become a refugee, I would not have come here. So I'm glad to have become a refugee and to have come here.

Discussion Questions for Refugee Serving Agencies:

1. With what information, or misinformation, about the U.S. do refugees arrive? What can refugee serving agencies do to give refugees accurate information, or to counter misinformation?
2. How do the naming practices described here differ from naming practices in the U.S.? What difficulties can arise when families or people-groups with informal naming practices come to the U.S.? What advice would you give them about naming?
3. What refugee-specific employment training opportunities exist in your area?
 - Resource: Refugee Works, the National Center for Refugee Employment and Self-Sufficiency, www.refugeeworks.org
 - Contact: Cheryl Hamilton, (410) 230-2751
 - chamilton@refugeeworks.org
4. How can refugee serving agencies help refugee families to prepare for and adapt to family role changes in the U.S.? What services are available in your area to support refugee couples?
 - Resource: Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), Healthy Marriages Grants, <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/funding/index.html>
 - BRYCS Resource: *Raising Children in a New Country: A Toolkit for Working with Refugee Parents*, see p. 22: "Marriage Enrichment Programs for Refugees"
5. How can refugee serving agencies in your area help new refugee groups to establish self-help organizations?
 - Resources:
 - Through the ORR-funded "Strategic Positioning Initiative," NAVASA; Mosaica: The Center for Nonprofit Development and Pluralism; and the Somali Family Care Network; are partnering to assist 8-12 Ethnic Community-Based Organizations with strategic planning and related services.
http://www.navasa.org/technical_assistance.htm
http://www.mosaica.org/about_staff_yimeem.asp
<http://www.somalifamily.org>
 - Contact: Huy Bui (301)587-2781
 - huy.bui@navasa.org
 - International Rescue Committee (IRC), Capacity Building Technical Assistance, Project SOAR (Strengthening Organizations Assisting Refugees), http://www.theirc.org/what/project_for_strengthening_organizations_to_assist_refugees_soar.html
 - Contact: Melissa Fogg, (212) 551.0954
 - Melissa.Fogg@theIRC.org
 - For more technical assistance resources, go to:
<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/tehasst/index.htm>
6. What advice, referrals or services would you offer to assist someone who is blind, such as the sister mentioned here? How does your agency address disability needs with refugee clients?
 - Resource: U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants' Refugees with Disabilities Technical Assistance Services;
 - Contact: Jonathan Lucus, (410) 230-2886, jlucus@RefugeeWorks.org