

Countries Around the World™

Myanmar (Burma)

Program Summary

Meet Bo Tu. He and his family live in a village in Myanmar, also known as Burma. Join Bo Tu as he finishes a day at school, learning about his country's flag and states. Once he returns home, he dresses in *longyi* and makes an offering in the tradition of Buddhism, Myanmar's main religion. Then, Bo Tu and his mother take a trip to the neighboring town of Bago. While there, Bo Tu introduces us to aspects of Myanmar's history and culture when he passes a statue of national hero General Aung San and stops to marvel at a giant Reclining Buddha statue believed to have been built by King Migadepa over one thousand years ago. Discover the Myanmar culture of spirit worship when Bo Tu attends *Nat-Pwe* — a celebration featuring mediums who, many believe, communicate with the spirit world. After a trip to the market, Bo Tu travels to the capital city of Yangôn where he prays at the majestic Shwedagon Pagoda. Finally, Bo Tu returns to his village and participates in his *shin-pyu*, a ceremony initiating him as a novice, Buddhist monk.

Country Information

- **location:** Southeast Asia, bordering the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal; bordered by Bangladesh, China, India, Laos and Thailand
- **capital:** Yangôn (Rangoon)
- **official language:** Burmese
- **type of government:** military junta
- **total area:** approximately 678,500 sq km
- **climate:** tropical, with cloudy, rainy, hot, humid summers; less cloudy, scant rainfall, mild temperatures and lower humidity during winter; northeast monsoon season is from December to April and southwest monsoon season is from June to September
- **terrain:** central lowlands ringed by steep, rugged highlands
- **natural resources:** includes petroleum, timber, tin, antimony, zinc, copper, tungsten, lead, coal, marble, limestone, precious stones, natural gas and hydropower
- **industries:** includes agricultural processing, wood and wood products, copper, tin, tungsten, iron, cement, construction materials, pharmaceuticals, fertilizer, natural gas, garments, jade and gems
- **agricultural products:** includes rice, pulses, beans, sesame, nuts, sugar-cane, hardwood, fish and fish products

Vocabulary

longyi — A cloth, often of brightly colored silk or cotton, that is used as a piece of clothing, especially a traditional, skirt-like garment.

Buddhism — A religion based on the life and teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha. This religion is practiced worldwide. The majority of people in Myanmar are Buddhist.

monastic — Referring to monks or nuns, their manner of life or their religious obligations.

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novice — A person who has entered a religious order but has not yet taken his or her final vows.

shin-pyu — Also *shin pyu*, *shinpyu*. An initiation ceremony in Myanmar, wherein young boys are accepted by a monastery as novice, Buddhist monks.

Pali — An ancient language used to write some of Buddhism's sacred texts in the 1st century B.C.E.

chinelone — A traditional sport of Myanmar that features a team of six players who pass a small ball to each other, using only their feet and knees, while walking around a circle. There is no opposing team, and the goal is to pass the ball as fluidly as possible without it touching a player's hands.

nats — The name for spirits in Myanmar. Many people in Myanmar believe in spirits.

Nat-Pwe — Also *Nat Pwe*, *Natpwe*. A celebration, marked by music, dancing and singing, wherein people seek to communicate with spirits through a medium, known as a nat-gadaw.

nat-gadaw — Also *nat gadaw*, *natgadaw*. A person in Myanmar believed to have the ability to communicate with spirits.

kyat — The currency of Myanmar.

thanaka — A cream made from mixing ground bark from thanaka trees with water that is used as a sunscreen and cosmetic.

Shwedagon Pagoda — A 2,500-year-old Buddhist pagoda located in the capital city of Yangôn. It is one of the most sacred pagodas in Myanmar.

stupa — A monument that contains Buddhist relics or expresses significant symbols related to Buddhism.

nirvana — The Buddhist belief in a state of being where there is no more suffering and no more rebirth.

reincarnation — The Hindu or Buddhist belief in rebirth after death.

Prince Siddhartha — Refers to Siddhartha Gautama, the founder of Buddhism.

saffron — A color that ranges from orange-yellow to orange.

monastery — A residence where a community of monks vow to live their religious lives.

Pre-viewing Discussion

- Have students prepare a schedule of what a typical weekday is like for each of them. They can include details of what they do before, during and after school. As students watch the program, instruct them to note any similarities or differences between their days and Bo Tu's day. Discuss these similarities and differences after viewing the program.
- Ask students what they would do and show if they were going to give a tour of their community to a child from another country. In small groups, have students brainstorm a list of things they think would be important to show their visitor. Engage the students with questions, such as: Why are these things important to you? How are they representative of where you live? Do you think your visitor would fully understand your community if he or she experienced all these things? Why or why not?
- Discuss what makes places different from each other. Begin by having students brainstorm a list of things that they think make places unique. Follow up with questions, such as: How is climate a factor in defining an area? How are land formations or bodies of water factors? Are people a part of making a place unique? How would you characterize the place where you live? What makes it unique? As they prepare to watch the program, ask students to predict how Myanmar is different from their communities. After the program, follow up by asking students to compare their predictions about Myanmar with what was shown. What are some of the things that were different? Was there anything that was similar to where you live?

Follow-up Activities

- In 1989, Burma adopted the official name of Myanmar, but the country is still called Burma by many people around the world. While it's not unusual for a country to have more than one name — even our country is called different names, like the United States, U.S.A. or America — changing a country's name can be difficult because often countries are given names based on important people or beliefs that have great meaning to their inhabitants. Have students investigate how the different countries around the world got their names and what they mean. Then, students can work in small groups to come up with new names for the countries around the world, based on what they learned about them. For the different names they come up with, ask them to explain why they chose the names that they did. Students can even create flags, national symbols and anthems for their newly-minted countries.
- Rice is a staple of the Myanmar diet. Conduct an investigation with students into the nutritional value of rice as well as of the dishes with which rice is served in Myanmar. Students will discover that fruit and fish are also big parts of the Myanmar diet. Discuss how these foods correspond to the geography and climate of the country. Younger students may enjoy reading Norah Dooley's *Everybody Cooks Rice* (Lerner, 1992) and discovering that rice is an ingredient in the traditional dishes of many cultures. As an extension, hold a cultural potluck in which rice is the key ingredient. The dishes students bring in can be a part of their cultural heritage or simply a favorite household dish.
- The teachings of Siddhartha Gautama became the basis for one of the world's most prominent religions, Buddhism, which is practiced by millions of people all over the world. Invite students to learn more about this venerable belief system by visiting www.woodlands-junior.kent.sch.uk/Homework/religion/buddhism.htm. Based on the information they find, students can work together to create a classroom display devoted to Buddhism. The display can include fact posters, time lines, maps, pictures or illustrations and Buddhist sayings.
- Students can have fun learning all about Myanmar by creating their own question and answer books. Begin by dividing the class into small groups and assigning each group a topic to cover, such as belief systems, climate, history, food or clothing. Once they have finished creating their books, students can use the material from their question and answer books in a classroom trivia game about Myanmar. An interactive tool for making a question and answer book can be found at www.readwritethink.org/materials/flipbook/.
- Myanmar is known for its many gemstones, such as rubies, sapphires and jade, which are imported to all parts of the world. Using various craft materials, students can pretend that they are Myanmar artisans who are designing jewelry for an upcoming *Nat-Pwe* ceremony. The students' creations can feature gemstones found in Myanmar and have names associated with *Nat-Pwe*, such as *gadaw's* charm or *nat* necklace. Students can even invent back stories for their jewelry, indicating how their pieces relate to the Myanmar *nat* culture.
- Invite students to write acrostic poems about Myanmar by using words associated with the country, such as "*shin-pyu*," "Buddhism" and "*longyi*." For an interactive guide on writing an acrostic poem, visit www.readwritethink.org/materials/acrostic/. Encourage students to share their poems with the class.
- Distribute outline maps of Myanmar to the class. Have students label the capital, other major cities and bodies of water. Then, divide the class into small groups. Have each group choose another characteristic of the country, such as yearly precipitation, terrain regions, monsoon seasons or population density, and use different colors and symbols to mark their maps. Each group can make a puzzle out of its map and exchange it with another group, to see who can put the puzzles together the quickest. When all of the puzzles have been completed, students can give a brief presentation to the class, that describes what their maps show about Myanmar.

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- *Shin-pyu*, the ritual through which boys are ceremonially accepted as novice, Buddhist monks, is considered an important rite of passage in Myanmar. And while *shin-pyu* is not a common occurrence in the United States, young people in this country have their own events to initiate them to adulthood. Discuss different rites of passage in the United States. Begin by introducing the concept of a rite of passage by asking students to relate stories about major events in their lives, such as birthdays, losing their first teeth, etc. Move the discussion toward other general milestones, such as getting a driver's license, in addition to culture-specific rites of passage, like bar and bat mitzvahs or quinceañera celebrations. Compare and contrast these rites of passage with the *shin-pyu* in the program to discern the uniqueness and universality of the experiences of young people growing up. Then, students can write and illustrate short stories about important rites of passage that they have gone through. Encourage them to share their stories with the class.

Suggested Internet Resources

- www.myanmar.com/index.html
This comprehensive site includes information about Myanmar's history, culture, geography and religion.
- www.myanmars.net/
This site, run by Myanmar entrepreneurs, includes detailed information about the history, geography and culture of Myanmar.
- www.cia.gov
The CIA World Factbook web site presents detailed and up-to-date information on Myanmar and many other countries. Topics include geography, people, government, economy, transportation and communication. On the main page of the CIA site, click on the "World Factbook" link. Please note: The World Factbook uses the name "Burma."

Suggested Print Resources

- Fisher, Frederick and Pauline Khng. *Myanmar*. Gareth Stevens Publishing, Milwaukee, WI; 2000.
- Ganeri, Anita. *Buddhism*. World Almanac Library, Strongsville, OH; 2006.
- Yin, Saw Myat. *Myanmar*. Marshall Cavendish, Tarrytown, NY; 2001.

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