

Location: A 1999 study placed 57,500 Azhe people in central Yunnan Province.¹ A 1984 figure listed 36,447 in Mile County,² while 7,200 live in Huaning County of Yuxi Prefecture. Others live in Kaiyuan (4,600) and Jianshui (200) counties. The Azhe typically live in flat-roofed, earthen homes.

Identity: In 1960 the Azhe were officially placed in the Yi nationality. The Azhe, however, refuse to intermarry with other peoples and are culturally and linguistically different from their neighbors. The Azhe are not the same ethnolinguistic group as the A Che people farther to the west, who speak a language from the Southern Yi branch.

Language: In ancient times, the Azhe language had a written script called *Baimawen* or "Shaman's Script". In Xunjiian District of Mile County, an ancient rock painting was recently discovered, representing the earliest form of *Baimawen*. It has been translated as "Braving the scorching sun of March, we got here on horseback". In its earliest form, *Baimawen* looked much like Egyptian hieroglyphics; as it developed, this Azhe writing system was used primarily by shamans for incantations and medicinal purposes.³

History: The Azhe say they originated in northern Yunnan. They migrated south to Jianshui during the Sui and Tang dynasties (581–907). At that time they were giving military assistance to the Luodian Kingdom.

Later, the people separated. Some went back to Yimen and Shuangbai counties where today they are the A Che people.⁴ Despite their shared origins, the languages and customs of the Azhe and A Che today differ remarkably.

Customs: The Azhe celebrate the annual Torch Festival. On the first day of the festival, many weddings take place. On the second day, the men sacrifice an ox at the foot of the sacred village tree.

Religion: After sacrificing an ox during the Torch Festival, the Azhe "engage in much chanting to invoke spirits. Having finished the chanting the men take the heart of the ox and boil it together with a rooster in order to appease the god of the Mountain. The meat from the ox is divided among all the men who participated in the sacrifice, and the ox bones are dispersed evenly to each family of the village. No one works during the Azhe Torch Festival and every night of the festival the youth engage in dancing, singing, and courtship."⁵ The Azhe hold many holidays centered in animism and polytheism. On the 14th day of the tenth lunar month, the



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whole village goes to a sacred mountain. They slaughter a cow and two chickens in hope of appeasing a mountain god whom they believe to be in charge of their welfare.

Christianity: There is one known Catholic meeting point among the Azhe, situated in Mile County. French Catholic missionaries worked extensively in the region in the first half of the twentieth century. Today, however, most Azhe are completely unaware of the gospel or the name of Christ, having been cut off from outside influence for generations. In the early part of this century the Sani people, located to the north, were reported to have more than 7,000 Catholics, but there is no evidence of Sani outreach to the Azhe who have a different language and culture.



Population in China:
 57,500 (1999)
 58,950 (2000)
 74,000 (2010)
Location: Yunnan
Religion: Polytheism
Christians: 100

Overview of the Azhe

Countries: China
Pronunciation: "Ah-jeh"
Other Names: Ajia, Arjie, Azhepuo, A-djay, A-gie, Axhebo, Aozhe, Huami Yi
Population Source: 57,500 (1999 J. Pelkey); Out of a total Yi population of 6,572,173 (1990 census)
Location: Yunnan: Mile (36,447), Huaning (7,200), Kaiyuan (4,600), and Jianshui (200) counties
Status: Officially included under Yi

Language: Sino-Tibetan, Tibeto-Burman, Burmese-Lolo, Lolo, Northern Lolo, Yi, Southeastern Yi
Dialects: 0
Religion: Polytheism, Animism, Ancestor Worship, Christianity
Christians: 100
Scripture: None
Jesus film: None
Gospel Recordings: Yi: Azhe
Christian Broadcasting: None
ROPAL code: YIE04

