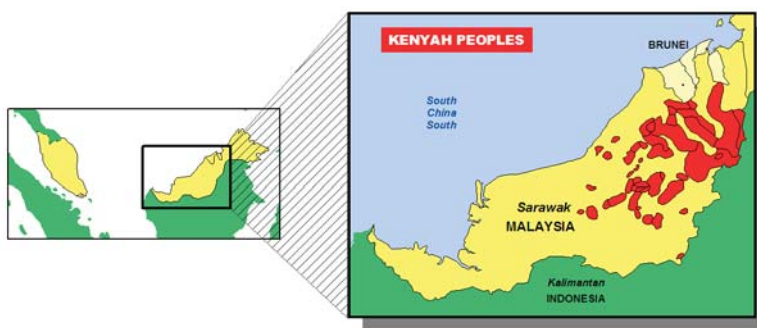


KENYAH PEOPLE GROUPS



| Population | Major Religion | Language |
|------------|----------------|----------|
| 40,000 | Christianity | Kenyah |

Who are the Kenyah?

Located in the high interior areas of Sarawak State and West Kalimantan live a people who call themselves Kenyah. There are approximately 40,000 Kenyah which comprise over forty divisions and live in more than 110 communities. One of the Upriver Peoples, they can be found living near river headwaters along the lower and upper reaches of the Baram and Balui Rivers, as well as in big coastal towns such as Miri, Bintulu and Kuching.

The fiber which seems to bind the Kenyah peoples together is the word “Kenyah,” which itself isn’t a Kenyah word but a Ga’ai-Kayan one meaning ‘upriver people’. Only certain groups are able to understand each other’s dialects while others are quite unintelligible. The differences brought about by the many dialects have divided the Kenyah peoples into several groups with varying histories.

What are their lives like?

The Kenyah cultivate dry rice in jungle clearings as their main source of livelihood. Their swidden rice agriculture, supplemented by hunting, fishing and gathering is a common feature of Kenyah society. Wage labor and cash crops are now becoming important additions to their economy as areas become more accessible for trade.

The Kenyah traditionally lived in villages comprised of multiple longhouses. Kenyah villages are almost exclusively located at the confluence of two rivers, providing easy access to current and future farm land since transportation is by river or foot.

The Kenyah have three different social classes. These classes are the *paren* ‘aristocrats’, the *panyen* ‘commoners’, and the *panyen amin* or *lipen* ‘slaves’. The *paren* exercise leadership in Kenyah communities and the *panyen* form the majority of the population.

Many Kenyah traditions are still strong but the practice of elongated earlobes is dying out. This used to be the most distinguishing feature of Kenyah women. The younger generations of educated Kenyah are migrating to urban areas seeking outside employment.

What do they believe?

In pre-modern times, the Kenyah all adhered to traditional animism. Even though there has been a Kenyah conception of a Creator God, *Penyelung Agung*, the deity responsible for creating the world was given little importance in day to day ritual matters. Instead there were a multitude of spirits, each with their own characteristics and responsibilities, whom the Kenyah believed intervene in human affairs.

Traditional animism and the Bungan cult are nowadays rarely practiced. Although a minority of Kenyah groups are followers of Islam, the overwhelming majority of Kenyah communities have accepted Christianity, though some traditional Kenyah animistic beliefs have taken root in the church.

What are their needs?

The Kenyah have skills and abilities that can be developed for twenty-first century living. They need professional management of small-scale industries in order to help improve their livelihood. This may help younger generations from migrating to urban areas. Additional research of their language and cultural diversity will provide understanding important for translating the good news appropriately for them. Pray that local believers will have a burden to assist them with opportunities such as developing home industries that will help the Kenyah gain a better standard of living.