

With a population in excess of a quarter million, the Western Kayah are the largest ethnic group in Kayah State in eastern Myanmar. One source states, 'Myanmar's Kayah State sits on its eastern border with Thailand, directly opposite Mae Hong Son Province. The entire state is consumed by a range of mountains that stretch the length of the eastern section of the country, varying in elevation from 3,000 to 8,000 feet within the Kayah State itself. Two major rivers, the Nampawn and the mighty Salween, run on a north-south route through the area, and have served as geographical landmarks throughout the fierce fighting which has raged here for over 20 years. The majority of the population lives in the military occupied towns and villages of the western third of the state and along the rebel borderlands near Thailand as IDPs (Internally Displaced Peoples). The entire state is off-limits to foreigners.'¹ The main centre for the Kayah people is the town of Loikaw in north-western Kayah State.



Myanmar: Faces and Places

An additional 20,000 Western Kayah refugees are presently stuck in refugee camps across the border in Thailand. Large numbers started fleeing Myanmar in the early 1990s, escaping the war between the Burmese military and the KNPP (Karen National Progressive Party), an anti-government faction operating in the Kayah State. Numerous horrific human rights abuses such as genocide and mass rape have been committed against the Kayah people by Burmese soldiers. Many Kayah are always on the move, travelling just ahead of the war parties from one location to another.

The Kayah are an 'often confused or misunderstood group of people. They are regularly confused with the term *Karenni*, a blanket term used to cover all groups living within the Kayah State of eastern Myanmar. Karenni can include the Padaung, Sgaw Karen, Kayah, and a couple of other small groups. . . . The true Kayah live primarily in the northern half of the State, and speak their own language, though most also speak Sgaw Karen.'² The Kayah are also called by the nickname *Red Karen* because of their brightly-coloured red head-cloths and shawls.³

The Western Kayah speak a different language from the Eastern Kayah, a group of about 70,000 who live in eastern Kayah State and in Thailand. Speakers of Eastern Kayah 'have difficulty understanding Western Kayah of Myanmar'.⁴ The Eastern Kayah have not been included in this book since only a minority believe in Buddhism.

The Western Kayah are 'primarily Buddhist in name, though there are very strong animistic characteristics woven throughout their belief system. They observe Buddhist rituals and make periodic visits to pagodas and monasteries, but almost all villages participate in spirit worship, paying homage to the *nats*, or other spirits.'⁵

Because Kayah State is completely off-limits to foreigners, it is difficult to gauge the number of Christians among the Western Kayah today, though the number is small and not likely to exceed one or two per cent of the population. Perhaps a thousand of the Western Kayah refugees in Thailand have turned to Christ, the result of practical love and evangelism by Karen Christian refugees and foreign missionaries.



Population:
269,867 (2000)
302,600 (2010)
339,600 (2020)
Countries: Myanmar, refugees in Thailand
Buddhism: Theravada
Christians: 4,000

Overview of the Western Kayah

Other Names: Kayah Li, Karenni, Karrenyi, Red Karen, Yang Deang, Karieng Daeng

Population Sources: 249,867 in Myanmar (2003, Myanmar Faces and Places)⁶

20,000 refugees in Thailand (2003, Myanmar Faces and Places)

Language: Sino-Tibetan, Tibeto-Burman, Karen, Sgaw-Bghai, Kayah

Dialects: 0

Professing Buddhists: 50%

Practising Buddhists: 20%

Christians: 1.5%

Scripture: none

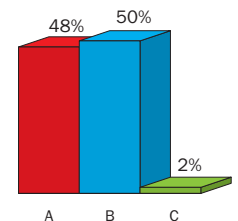
Jesus film: available

Gospel Recordings: Kayah

Christian Broadcasting: none

ROPAL code: KYU

Status of Evangelization



A = Have never heard the gospel
B = Have heard the gospel but have not become Christians
C = Are adherents to some form of Christianity