



Population in China:
 1,000 (1991)
 1,260 (2000)
 1,620 (2010)
Location: Yunnan
Religion: Animism
Christians: None Known

Overview of the Kemei

Countries: China, Laos
Pronunciation: "Keh-may"

Other Names:
 Kemeihua, Ka Mi, Kebi

Population Source:
 1,000 (1991 *EDCL*);
 450 (1996 D. Graybill);
 Also in Laos

Location: SW Yunnan:
 Jinghong and Mengla counties
 in Xishuangbanna Prefecture

Status: Unidentified

Language: Austro-Asiatic,
 Mon-Khmer, Northern Mon-Khmer,
 Khmuic, Unclassified

Dialects: 0

Religion: Animism, Ancestor
 Worship, Theravada Buddhism

Christians: None known

Scripture: None

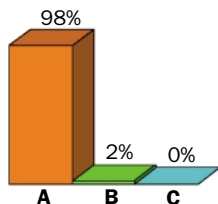
Jesus film: None

Gospel Recordings: None

Christian Broadcasting: None

ROPAL code: KFJ00

Status of Evangelization



A = Have never heard the gospel
B = Were evangelized but did not become Christians
C = Are adherents to any form of Christianity

Location: The *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Chinese Linguistics* listed a 1991 population of 1,000 Kemei in southern China.¹ Researcher Dwayne Graybill who visited the area in 1996, however, listed a total of only 450 Kemei living in two villages. The largest village, Kami Zhai, contained 285 inhabitants in 47 households.² The Kemei villages are west of Meng Ban and south of Mengla, in the Xishuangbanna Prefecture. The Kemei also claim to have relatives living in Laos.

Identity: The Kemei are a little-known group. It is not known in what minority, if any, the Kemei are counted by the Chinese authorities, who officially spell their name *Ka Mi*. The Kemei are not the same as the Khmu people group, who live in the same county and whose language is also from the Mon-Khmer linguistic family. Although their name resembles *Khmer*, the usual Chinese transliteration of Khmer is *Gaomian*.³

Language: The Kemei language retains many linguistic similarities with Khmu. Both languages are part of the Northern Mon-Khmer linguistic branch of the Austro-Asiatic language family. Some Kemei are reportedly able to read the Tai Lu "temple script."⁴

History: The Kemei claim they were once part of the Khmu race of Laos. They migrated to China approximately 60 years ago to escape war in Laos. They tell a colorful story explaining why they split from the Khmu. Long ago the two groups went out into the mountains on a hunting

expedition. The Khmu killed an elephant, but the Kemei did not believe in eating elephants and caught pigs instead. The Kemei complained, saying it was not fair because the Khmu got to eat much more meat than they did. The quarrel grew so fierce that they decided to separate and have remained apart to this day.⁵

Customs: Because of their small numbers, the Kemei intermarry outside their tribe. At the end of the year, the Kemei hold a festival to bring in the New Year. All Kemei wear red and yellow flowers during the celebration. They say this stems from a long time ago when a prince in Laos was murdered by a farmer. To mourn his death, all the people brought red and yellow flowers to his funeral. When a Kemei dies, they kill his pig and place it next to the corpse along with rice, vegetables, and his knife.

Religion: The Kemei practice animism, with a demonic element to their rituals. To determine where a burial site should be, they carry an egg to the mountains and, with the help of mediums, are led by the spirits. When they reach the appointed place, the egg supernaturally turns black. The Kemei say the spirit of a dead person often returns home, so they continue leaving out food on the table for it.⁶

Christianity: An impromptu survey of the members of a Kemei community in 1996 revealed none had ever before heard of Jesus Christ. Dwayne Graybill reported, "Puzzled looks came upon the faces of both old and young when asked if they had heard of Him. There has never been a church among the Kemei, nor has there ever been a single known believer among their entire tribe."⁷



Dwayne Graybill