



Jakob Fischer

Location: The Burmese are one of Asia's great ethnic groups. Numbering over 37 million people,¹ they constitute 69% of the population of Myanmar, and another three million Burmese are scattered across the globe.² A 2022 demographic analysis found: "The massive population of the Bamar [Burmese] is concentrated in central to lower Myanmar, with 94% of the total Bamar population living in five regions (Ayeerwady, Bago, Magway, Yangon, and Mandalay). They are the majority in all but 15 townships across the five regions and they make up more than 99% of the population in 57 out of the 202 townships."³

Identity: The Burmese are the majority ethnic group in Myanmar, having eight times as many people as the second most populous group (Shan). Also known as the Barma, which gave birth to the old country name Burma, they also refer to themselves as the Myan or Myen, from which the new name of Myanmar is derived. Having absorbed cultural influences from China, India, Thailand, and elsewhere, the Burmese possess a rich cultural heritage.

Language: The Burmese language, which has three tones and consists of 31 consonants and eight vowels, is part of the Tibeto-Burman family, completely different from other regional giants such as Thai, Chinese, Malay, and Khmer. Millions of people from other tribes and groups in Myanmar speak Burmese as a second language, as it is the national language of education and media. Many Mon, Shan, and Karen people have lost the use of their mother tongue and are now monolingual in Burmese.

History: The Burmese originated in southwest China and began migrating to today's Myanmar in the ninth century AD. Although the Burmese like to portray themselves as the ancient occupants of Myanmar, other peoples like the Mon were already established millennia before they arrived.⁴ The Burmese quickly became the dominant power in the fertile Ayeyarwady River Valley, establishing a great capital at Bagan in 1044. The city contained more than 13,000 Buddhist temples before it was sacked by the Mongol hordes in 1287.

Customs: Most rural Burmese

families lead simple lives raising animals and growing rice, fruit, and vegetables. In the cities they run businesses and serve as government employees. Since the 1960s, Myanmar has seen a succession of coups and wars as the Burmese seek to maintain power over more than 200 other groups that form the ethnic fabric of Myanmar. Since 2021, the brutal civil war has seen levels of barbarity and genocidal killings that have caused many of Myanmar's citizens to despise their Burmese rulers.

Religion: The Burmese have zealously followed Theravada Buddhism since the 11th century, when the King of Burma invited the monk Arahan from Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) to instruct him and his subjects on the teachings of Buddha. The Pali script (derived from Sanskrit) was introduced, and over the next millennium Buddhism became intertwined with the Burmese ethnic identity. Today tens of thousands of temples are scattered throughout the country, although the faith of many is mixed with *nat* (spirit) worship.⁵

Christianity: Baptist missionary Adoniram Judson arrived in Burma in 1813. Facing extraordinary hardships, imprisonment, and loneliness, Judson and his family almost single-handedly established the Gospel in this seat of Buddhism, and he translated the Bible into Burmese in 1835.⁶ Through eyes of faith, Judson saw a day when Jesus would conquer the teachings of Buddha. He boldly predicted: "A still, small voice will before long sweep away every vestige of Buddha's dominion. The churches of Jesus will soon supplant these idolatrous monuments, and the chanting of the devotees of Buddha will die away before the Christian hymn of praise."⁷ Although they remain one of the largest unreached groups in the world, with only about one percent believing in Christ, in recent years tens of thousands of disillusioned Burmese have placed their trust in Christ. More Burmese have become Christians in the past decade than in the previous 200 years combined.⁸



Population in Myanmar: 37,880,000 (2025)

Location: Ayeyarwady Region, Bago Region, Magway Region, Yangon Region, Mandalay Region

Language Family: Tibeto-Burman

Main Religion: Buddhism (95.0%)

Christians: 378,800 (1.0%)

OVERVIEW

Population: 37,880,000 in Myanmar (2025 United Nations)¹ 32,000,000 (2007 D. Bradley) 31,400,000 (2024 SIL) 23,532,433 (1983 census) 8,596,031 (1931 census)

Other Countries: 2.3 million in Thailand 204,000 in USA 164,000 in Saudi Arabia 110,000 in Japan 83,000 in Bangladesh²

Other Names: Bama, Bamachaka, Barnas, Barma, Bhama, Bomang, Burman, Man, Myan, Myanmas, Myen, Yaw

Location: Widespread in south and central Myanmar, especially Ayeyarwady Region, Bago Region, Magway Region, Yangon Region, and Mandalay Region

Language: Burmese [mya]

Dialects: 7

Scripture: Bible 1835 New Testament 1832 Portions 1815

Jesus film: Burmese

Global Recordings: Burmese #195

People ID: 11029

