



Stuart Black

Location: Just over 100,000 Intha people live in Myanmar’s southern Shan State. Famously, they are the group who live on and around Inle Lake in Taunggyi District, inhabiting four towns on the shores of the lake and dwelling on the water itself.¹ The beautiful Inle Lake is 13 miles (22 km) long and 7 miles (11 km) wide. It has “very calm waters dotted with patches of floating vegetation and busy fishing canoes. Intha homes on the water are made of wood and woven bamboo. High hills rim the lake on both sides. The lakeshore and lake islands bear 17 villages on stilts, mostly inhabited by the Intha people.”² Nyaungshwe Township is home to all Intha people, with some of their important villages being Heha Ywama, In Chan, Nan Pan, Paw Kon, and Tha Lay. Other ethnicities in the township include the Shan, Pa-O, Taungyo, Danu, Kayah, and Burmese.

Identity: The Intha, whose name means “children of the lake,” are one of the most iconic ethnic groups in Asia. The 1901 census listed 50,478 Intha people, which increased slightly to 56,901 in 1931. Of those, almost all were Buddhists, with a small number identifying as animists and Muslims, but no Christians were counted among them at all.

Language: Early British writers commonly described the Intha language as Burmese with a

Shan accent. Intha is closely related to Burmese, although one source notes it is “a well-known nonstandard variety of Burmese with major pronunciation and vocabulary differences.”³ Lexical studies show their close relationship to other Tibeto-Burman languages, sharing 95% similarity with standard Burmese, 93% with Danu, 89% with Taungyo, and 90% with Rakhine.

History: Scholars have long debated the origins of the Intha people, but most seem to agree that they arrived many centuries ago from southern Myanmar. One theory says they are descended from Burmese who migrated north during the reign of King Narapatisithu (1174–1210), although others believe they stem from slaves who were taken captive during wars with the Mon and Dawei people.⁴ Another source states that the Intha formed as a people group after “two brothers from Dawei came to Nyaungshwe in 1359 to serve a local ruler. The latter was so pleased with the hard-working demeanor of the brothers that he asked them to invite 36 more families from Dawei. Purportedly, all the Intha around Inle Lake are descended from these migrant families.”⁵

Customs: The Intha are famous for their unique method of rowing with one leg. Fishermen “wrap a paddle around one hand and leg

and use this to propel the boat while balancing precariously on the other leg. This position leaves them with one hand free, allowing them to drop a large conical net over passing fish in the shallow waters of the lake.”⁶ Many Intha derive their income from tourism, while floating garden markets on the lake sell flowers and vegetables.

Religion: The Intha are entrenched in their Buddhist beliefs. For centuries they have clung to their religion, seeing little need for change. At least 100 Buddhist temples and pagodas dot the hills around Inle Lake or have been built in the lake itself. Buddhism pervades every part of Intha life and culture, giving them their identity, security, and traditions.

Christianity: Because of their dedication to Buddhism, the Intha feel that if they embraced Christianity, it would be a grave offence to their culture and to their ancestors. As a result, only a tiny number of Intha people have ever accepted Jesus Christ, and they remain one of the neediest unreached groups in Myanmar today. No part of the Bible exists in the Intha language, as ministries believe they can be adequately reached using the Burmese Scriptures. A great need exists for good evangelistic video and audio materials to be produced in Intha, however.



Population
in Myanmar:
103,000 (2024)

Location:
Shan State

Language Family:
Tibeto-Burman

Main Religion:
Buddhism (99.0%)

Christians:
100 (0.1%)

OVERVIEW

Population:
103,000 in Myanmar
(2024 Joshua Project)
90,000 (2000 D. Bradley)
56,901 (1931 census)

Other Countries:

Other Names:
Intha, Innthar, Insa, Naung Ma

Location:
Shan State: Nyaungshwe Township and the Inle Lake area of Taunggyi District

Language:
Intha [int]

Dialects: 0

Scripture:
None

Jesus film:
None

Global Recordings:
Intha #10906

People ID:
12237

