



Population in Myanmar: 6,650 (2024)

Location: Rakhine State

Language Family: Tibeto-Burman

Main Religion: Buddhism (97.0%)

Christians: 200 (3.0%)

OVERVIEW

Population: 6,650 in Myanmar (2024 Ethnologue)

Other Countries:

Other Names: Ekai, Ekai Chin, Laoktu

Location: Rakhine State: Ann Township in Kyaukpyu District

Language: Chin, Laoktu [cey]

Dialects: 4

Scripture: None

Jesus film: None

Global Recordings: None

People ID: 21577



Religious adherence



ClickAlps

Location: In 2024, the respected Ethnologue gave a precise population of 6,650 “Ekai” people in southwest Myanmar’s Rakhine State, but subsequent research has shown that the Ekai are merely a clan or dialect group of the Lawktu tribe. Leaders have petitioned mission organizations to change their name to Lawktu. The Lawktu inhabit villages in the northern part of Ann Township in Kyaukpyu (“white rock”) District. Kyaukpyu is situated on the eastern coast of the Bay of Bengal and is subject to the frequent cyclones that lash the area. Ann Township in the northern part of the district is highly mountainous with dense forests. The Ann Pass, at an elevation of 4,650 feet (1,420 meters), is a key trading access route to and from the Lawktu area. The large Ann Creek Hydropower Project is being constructed just a few miles from Ann town, which promises to bring a plentiful supply of electricity to the region, along with many jobs.

Identity: The Lawktu have never appeared in any official lists

of Myanmar’s ethnic groups. During the British colonial period, their area was labeled an “unadministered territory,” considered so inaccessible that census officials never tried to enter it. The Lawktu qualify as a distinct ethno-linguistic group in Myanmar because they speak their own language and possess their own identity, history, and customs. They are also rare among the several dozen Chin-related tribes in Myanmar in that they are fully located outside Chin State, and they are a strong Buddhist group due to prolonged contact with Rakhine and Burmese people.

Language: The Lawktu language has four dialects and is part of the Cho-Asho branch of the Tibeto-Burman family. Linguists have determined that it is a distinct language, mutually unintelligible with other Chin varieties, although it reportedly has 76% lexical similarity with Asho and Sumtu, 74% with Letu, and 73% with Uppu.¹ Lawktu was an unwritten language until 2020, when the Roman

orthography was used to reduce it to writing. Almost all Lawktu people are bilingual in Burmese.

History: Ann Township was founded in 1333 by King Min Hti of Arakan, who some sources say was the longest reigning monarch in world history, with his rule reputedly stretching for 95 years from 1279 to 1374. Min Hti was one of a long line of ardent Buddhist rulers in the region who helped lay a strong foundation of Buddhism, which remains to this day.²

Customs: Most of the Lawktu homeland in Ann Township is covered in expansive virgin forests that contain rare and valuable timber. The wider Kyaukpyu District also contains numerous “mud volcanoes,” from which marsh gas is frequently discharged. Iron, coal, and limestone were mined in the area until the outbreak of the Myanmar civil war in 2021 brought almost all industrial activity to its knees.

Religion: Rakhine State has always been proudly Buddhist, with people holding a widespread belief that the Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, visited in 554 BC. The Lawktu were probably animists when they first arrived in their current location from the north, but they were converted by the dominant Buddhist peoples in the state, and today almost all Lawktu people identify as Theravada Buddhists.

Christianity: The Gospel first reached Kyaukpyu when the American Baptist missionaries, Grover and Sarah Comstock, moved to the town in March 1835. The Kyaukpyu Baptist Church was established two years later in 1837. For decades nothing was done to develop the work further. Sporadic efforts by Christians from other Chin tribes to reach the Lawktu have largely proved ineffective due to the geographic, cultural, linguistic, and religious barriers that insulated them from the Gospel. As a result, today just a few hundred known Christians exist among the Lawktu, or a mere 3% of their population. They may be the most unreached Chin tribe in Myanmar. No Scripture or any other Christian resource has been produced in the Lawktu language.