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Population in Myanmar:
4,700 (2025)

Location:
Tanintharyi Region

Language Family:
Austronesian

Main Religion:
Animism (91.0%)

Christians:
420 (9.0%)

Location: The fascinating 4,700 Moken people inhabit many islands in the remote Mergui Archipelago, which is flanked by the Andaman Sea to the west and Thailand to the east. Most families live on boats, but some choose to settle on the many islands in this southeast corner of Myanmar.¹ A further 2,200 Moken people inhabit islands in adjacent parts of Thailand.

Identity: The Moken have been recognized in Myanmar for well over a century, with 1,930 people counted in the 1931 census. Despite their modest population, the Moken have been studied extensively, as they are possibly the most unique people group in Myanmar. Although their self-name is Moken, the Burmese call them "Solon." One source says their name "comes from two of their words and means 'drowned in the sea.' Generations ago, the ancestors of the Moken had a large kingdom. They were turned out by the Burmese and took to boat life.... Many drowned in the sea, hence their name."²

Language: Many claim that Moken, which has three dialects and consists of 22 consonants and 25 vowels, is the only language spoken in Myanmar from the Austronesian family, but the nearby Malay also speak an Austronesian language.³ While all Moken adults speak their mother tongue, some young people are increasingly using Burmese, and Moken may be threatened in the

future. They use the Burmese script for reading and writing, while those across the border use Thai.

History: Experts are baffled by the origins of the Moken people. They seem out of place in this part of Asia, and may have originated far afield, as Austronesian languages are scattered as far as Madagascar off the coast of Africa. Moken oral history stretches back to the start of mankind. After narrating some of their legends, missionary Judson Benjamin wrote: "The Moken have many traditions of creation and a universal deluge. They believe in future rewards and punishments."⁴ He further explained: "After the deluge, God came down from heaven and assigned to the different nations and tribes of men their habitations and employments. He said to the Moken, 'You are foolish and disobedient. You must not possess gold, silver, domestic animals, houses, or land. Go, be poor, and fish in water seven fathoms deep.'"⁵

Customs: The Moken have incredible aquatic skills and underwater sight. They seem happiest when diving to catch sea slugs, sea cucumbers, clams, and large shellfish. The Moken have appeared in many documentaries.⁶ Some fear for their future, however, and that they may face extinction due to outside influences.⁷ An early 20th century missionary described the Moken as "cooking, eating, sleeping, and marrying in their

unique little craft. They are to be found here today and 50 miles off tomorrow. Some of them have small huts, like magnified dog kennels, on various islands, but even these people spend the greater part of their time traveling about in their boats, seeking food."⁸

Religion: Baptist missionaries in the 1850s noted: "An interesting feature of this people is their pure monotheism. One supreme being, Tooda, is recognized as the creator of all things."⁹ In reality, the superstitious Moken have practiced Animism and have been enslaved by a myriad of demons, with shamans casting spells on people and acting as mediators between people and the spirits.¹⁰ Although about one in ten Moken people today profess to be Christians, the faith of many is nominal.

Christianity: The first missionary among the Moken was Durin Brayton from Vermont, who arrived in 1846 but abandoned the work six years later after 16 converts had been won. Early efforts to evangelize the Moken were often hindered by their addiction to alcohol and opium.¹¹ Although the Jesus film is available in Moken and the New Testament was published in 2000, it has made little impact because most Moken people are only partially literate.¹² While many Moken have professed Christ, discipleship has been a challenge, with a large percentage of Moken believers leaving the church.

OVERVIEW

Population:
4,700 in Myanmar
(2025 Joshua Project)
4,000 (2007 D. Bradley)
1,930 (1931 census)
1,325 (1901 census)

Other Countries:
2,200 in Thailand

Other Names:
Basing, Celone, Chau Ko, Lawta, Mawken, Mokelem, Morgan, Myiek, Orang Laut, Salon, Salone, Salong, Saloun, Sea Gypsies, Sea Gypsies, Selong, Selung, Solon

Location:
Tanintharyi Region: Myeik and Kyunsu townships in Myeik District; Bokpyin Township in Bokpyin District; and Kawthoung Township in Kawthoung District

Language: Moken [mwɪ]

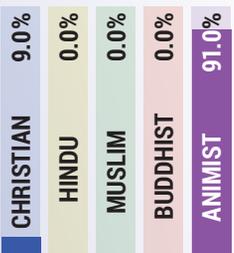
Dialects: 3

Scripture:
New Testament 2000
Portions 1913

Jesus film: Moken

Global Recordings:
Moken #1136

People ID: 13769



Religious adherence