

WA, PARAUK



Population in Myanmar:
461,000 (2025)

Location:
Shan State, Kachin State, Yangon Region, Mandalay Region

Language Family:
Austro-Asiatic

Main Religion:
Animism (62.0%)

Christians:
138,300 (30.0%)

OVERVIEW

Population:
461,000 in Myanmar (2025 Joshua Project)
400,000 (2000 census)
10,465 (1931 census)

Other Countries:
380,000 in China
7,100 in Thailand

Other Names:
Awa, Baraog, Baraoko, Lwela, Paraog, Parauk, Praok, Sanhton, Va, Wa Pwi

Location:
Shan State: Kengtung, Mong Hsat, Mong Ton, and Taunggyi districts;
Kachin State: Taung Township in Bhamo District; Yangon Region; Mandalay Region

Language:
Wa, Parauk [prk]

Dialects: 78

Scripture:
Bible 2006
New Testament 1938
Portions 1934

Jesus film:
None

Global Recordings:
Wa, Parauk #21277

People ID: 15759



Religious adherence

Klaus-Werner Friedrich



Location: The Wa are one of the largest and most powerful tribes in northern Myanmar, with approximately 460,000 people spread across Shan State, especially along the Chinese border. An additional 380,000 Wa people live inside China's Yunnan Province. Their historical homeland, sometimes referred to as "the Wa corridor," is a 150-mile (243-km) strip of rugged, jungle-clad mountains between the Salween and Mekong rivers. The Wa spill over into eastern Kachin State, and a small number have migrated to Myanmar's two largest cities, Yangon and Mandalay. More than 7,000 Wa people now also live in northern Thailand.

Identity: The Wa, whose name means "mountaineer,"¹ are an extremely complex ethnic group, consisting of dozens of dialect subgroups. From a research point of view, they remain one of the most mysterious and least-studied groups in Myanmar.² The main Wa vernacular, Parauk, has 78 different dialects in Myanmar and over 300 varieties in China!³ This incredible complexity came about because the Wa's long history of violence caused them to adopt an insular mindset. As a result, small sub-tribes and clans formed to defend themselves, and they did not intermarry outside their tribe or with different Wa communities.

Language: The Parauk Wa alphabet contains 35 consonants and nine

vowels. It enjoys vigorous use in their communities, with most females in rural areas only able to speak their own language. As a sign of their isolation and fierce independence, just 8% of Wa people (mostly males) in Myanmar can speak the national language, Burmese. In 1957, a Wa script was created in China using Roman characters, but most Wa people have never learned to read or write.⁴

History: Little is known of early Wa history, but the Shan people acknowledge them to be the original inhabitants of the Kengtung area prior to 1229, when they were displaced and later defeated by the Lanna kingdom. Two main Wa militia groups are engaged in long wars against the Burmese junta and other ethnic groups. The largest is the United Wa State Army, founded in 1989 after more than 20,000 Wa people were killed in fighting against the Communist Party of Burma, which had China's backing. The Wa State Army currently boasts about 30,000 well-equipped soldiers that are funded by drug trafficking and other illicit operations.⁵

Customs: The Wa were traditionally divided into "Wild Wa," who practiced head hunting, and "Tame Wa," who had converted to Buddhism. One Wa community near Kengtung is said to have displayed over 300 human skulls beside the village gate. The ghoulish practice was conducted "as protection against evil spirits. Without skulls,

the Wa believed their families would die and their crops would fail.... The heads of strangers were always favored because it was thought the ghost would not linger, as it didn't know the way out of the hills. New heads were particularly important during the spring planting season."⁶

Religion: In the past, Wa communities sacrificed hundreds of cows and other livestock each year to appease spirits and to obey the orders of local shamans. One village of 407 households sacrificed 874 cows between 1955 and 1957, an average of more than two cows per household.⁷ This practice kept the people trapped in dire poverty. Today, most Wa people in Myanmar remain animists, although approximately 30% have converted to Christianity during the past century.

Christianity: Baptist missionary William Young from Nebraska first brought the gospel to the Wa in 1906. In a remarkable testimony of God's love and power, thousands of heathen Wa were swept into God's kingdom.⁸ Young moved across the border in the 1920s, and by 1948, 22,369 Wa people in China had been baptized.⁹ The Parauk Wa New Testament was published in 1938 and the full Bible in 2006, with Asia Harvest providing 80,000 Bibles to Wa churches in 2022.¹⁰ Although there are thousands of strong Wa Christians in Myanmar, many professing believers lack even a basic understanding of salvation.¹¹