



Myanmar Places & Faces

**Location:** An estimated 22,000 Yaw people inhabit about 50 villages in the Gangaw and Pakokku districts of Magway Region, between the Ponnya mountains on the west bank of the Chindwin River and the Chin Hills. A smaller Yaw community is located further north in Kachin State. The population of the Yaw is open to debate. They first appeared in the 1891 census and numbered just 910 in 1931, but the low number was “partly due to a reluctance to identify as a Yaw.”<sup>1</sup> Between those times, a 1917 linguistic survey found there were “over 24,000” Yaw people.<sup>2</sup> More modern estimates of their population depend on whether the source is counting the members of the ethnic group or just those who can still speak the Yaw language. As a result, although the 2013 Ethnologue listed 200,000 Yaw speakers,<sup>3</sup> later editions do not mention Yaw apart from it being a

Burmese dialect.

**Identity:** Scholars have long wrestled over how to classify the Yaw people, and equally long over their population, with British officer Cecil Lewis claiming in 1910, “The Yaws have almost disappeared.”<sup>4</sup> The Yaw have been heavily influenced by Burmese culture and began a long process of cultural assimilation generations ago. As they retain a distinct history, group identity, and their own peculiar dialect, the Yaw have been profiled in this book despite other sources claiming they no longer exist.

**Language:** Early scholars during the colonial period had differing views on the Yaw vernacular, with one observing in 1900: “The Yaw dialect is a hybrid, nearest to Burmese now. Possibly at one time it was nearer to Shan or to some of the Chin dialects.”<sup>5</sup> Another source found that “Yaw has few differences from standard

Burmese. At first, the dialect is difficult to understand, but after a few days one finds oneself speaking it without difficulty.”<sup>6</sup> Today, Yaw is either ignored completely or considered one of the five main dialects of Burmese spoken in Myanmar. The United Nations labeled Yaw “definitely endangered” in 2010.<sup>7</sup>

**History:** Academics have wildly different theories regarding the origins of the Yaw. One historian claims they were originally a Chin tribe and that the name Yaw is the Burmese version of “Zo,” which is a common label for many Chin-related tribes. He wrote that during the Mongol invasion of the 13th century, “Burmans who were driven to migrate west of the Ayeyarwady River seemed to recognize the Zo with their own name.... They shared Tibeto-Burman languages, and therefore the Zo plain dwellers in the Yaw valley easily adopted the Burmese language and way of life, including their religion. These Burmanized Zo people call themselves Yaw today and speak Burmese with a distinctive dialect.”<sup>8</sup>

**Customs:** With most Yaw people living near the Ayeyarwady and Chindwin rivers, fishing and trade have formed key parts of their existence and economic survival. After living in relative peace for generations, civil war came to the Yaw area in 2021, with the Burmese junta massacring Yaw villagers who supported the National League for Democracy Party.<sup>9</sup>

**Religion:** When the 1931 census returned 910 Yaw people, all of them identified as Buddhists and were reputedly “skilled in the magical arts.”<sup>10</sup> Apart from a tiny number of animists and Christians, all Yaw people are professing Buddhists today.

**Christianity:** Although Christian organizations now consider the Yaw a dialect group of Burmese, in the past, Global Recordings found their speech distinct enough from Burmese to produce audio resources in Yaw. A very small number of Yaw people are thought to be Christians today.



**Population in Myanmar:**  
22,000 (2025)

**Location:**  
Magway Region,  
Kachin State

**Language Family:**  
Tibeto-Burman

**Main Religion:**  
Buddhism (98.0%)

**Christians:**  
110 (0.5%)

## OVERVIEW

**Population:**  
22,000 in Myanmar  
(2025 Joshua Project)  
24,000 (1917 Linguistic Survey of Burma)  
910 (1931 census)

**Other Countries:**

**Other Names:**

**Location:**  
Magway Region: Gangaw  
and Pakokku districts  
Kachin State: Myitkyina District

**Language:**  
Burmese, Yaw [mya]

**Dialects:**

**Scripture:**  
Burmese Bible 1835  
New Testament 1832  
Portions 1815

**Jesus film:**  
Burmese

**Global Recordings:**  
Burmese, Yaw #8541

**People ID:** 18998



Religious adherence