



**Population in Myanmar:**  
60,000 (2025)

**Location:**  
Kachin State, Shan State

**Language Family:**  
Tibeto-Burman

**Main Religion:**  
Animism (60.0%)

**Christians:**  
12,000 (20.0%)

## OVERVIEW

**Population:**  
60,000 in Myanmar (2025)  
Kachin Baptist Convention  
33,000 (2021 SIL)  
5,318 (1931 census)

**Other Countries:**  
120,000 in China

**Other Names:**  
Aci, Aji, Atshi, Atsi, Atsi-Maru, Atzi, Azi, Szi, Tsaiva, Tsaiva, Xiaoshan, Zeitwa, Zi

**Location:**  
Kachin State: Waimaw Township in Myitkyina District  
Shan State: Kengtung District

**Language:**  
Zaiwa [atb]

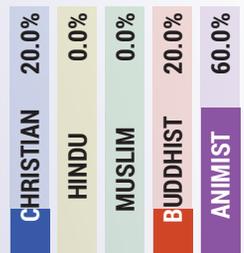
**Dialects:** 3

**Scripture:**  
Bible 2025  
New Testament 2009  
Portions 1939

**Jesus film:**  
Zaiwa

**Global Recordings:**  
Zaiwa Kachin #1176

**People ID:** 15586



Religious adherence



ImageChina

**Location:** Boasting a population of 60,000 people in northern Myanmar,<sup>1</sup> the Zaiwa are scattered throughout Waimaw Township in Kachin State’s Myitkyina District, especially in and surrounding the small town of Sadon. A smaller Zaiwa community live far to the southeast in Shan State’s Kengtung District. Most Zaiwa people live south of the confluence of the N’mai and Mali rivers, which feed into the mighty Ayeyarwady, which for 1,500 years has served as the main artery of trade and travel in Myanmar. Further north in China, approximately 120,000 Zaiwa people inhabit a widespread area of Yunnan Province’s Dehong Prefecture.

**Identity:** Although this group’s members call themselves Zaiwa, other ethnicities know them by a variety of names. Other Kachin tribes call them “Atsi,” while the Burmese call them “Zi.” Although culturally the Zaiwa are happy to be viewed as part of the larger Kachin collective, their language is so different from other Kachin varieties that it is listed in a different linguistic branch. There are at least four subgroups of Zaiwa in Myanmar,<sup>2</sup> with the Lahpai clan traditionally producing all the Zaiwa chiefs.<sup>3</sup> The Zaiwa are the largest subgroup among the official Jingpo nationality in China.

**Language:** Zaiwa, which has five tones, enjoys vigorous use,

although scholars are concerned about its preservation as young people increasingly speak the other languages used in education and the media. Zaiwa was unwritten until the famous missionary James O. Fraser created a script and published the Gospel of Mark in 1939. The Fraser script soon became obsolete, but an orthography based on the Roman alphabet was devised for the Zaiwa in 1957.<sup>4</sup> Previously, the Zaiwa kept records by notching wood or tying knots, and calculations were done by counting beans.

**History:** For generations the Zaiwa on the Chinese side of the border acted like the mafia. Their *gumsa* system encouraged a “belligerent, competitive, authoritarian society whose chiefs were chosen by public consent.”<sup>5</sup> In the 1980s, the large Zaiwa village of Banwa forced 44 neighboring villages, amounting to 1,020 households, to pay them “protection” money,<sup>6</sup> and the Zaiwa even bullied Lisu households into paying them a tax of three squirrels per year, to be used as offerings to the spirits.<sup>7</sup> In January 2017, two refugee camps in Waimaw Township were attacked by mortar fire from the Burmese military. About 4,000 (mostly Zaiwa) people attempted to flee the fighting by crossing the border to Yunnan Province but were forced back by the Chinese into the conflict zone.<sup>8</sup>

**Customs:** In the past the Zaiwa had a fearsome reputation and were slaves to almost every kind of vice.<sup>9</sup> Fraser described them as “the wildest people around here by a long way. Inveterate robbers, their hand is against every man and every man’s hand is against them. Dirty, unkempt, ignorant, everybody despises them. They are savages.”<sup>10</sup> Today the tribe observes its own festivals, and “their Htaungka dance is famous. They have wind instruments made from buffalo horns.”<sup>11</sup>

**Religion:** While other Kachin groups contain large numbers of dedicated Christians, the Zaiwa have responded to the Gospel with less fervency. Shamans were present in every Zaiwa village, ensuring the people were kept trapped in fear and poverty.<sup>12</sup>

**Christianity:** Despite living alongside strong Kachin Jingpo Christian communities, in the early 1990s it was reported: “The demon-worshipping Zaiwa never show the slightest inclination to turn to Christianity. Moreover, Zaiwa who become Christians in some of the mixed villages are ostracized.”<sup>13</sup> The *Jesus* film and the Zaiwa New Testament were completed in 2009, and the full Bible was published in 2025, raising hopes for a breakthrough among the 80% of Zaiwa people who do not follow Jesus Christ.