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Location: The little-known Akeu tribe numbers 4,300 people in northeast Myanmar, located in the Kengtung, Mongkhat, and Mongla townships, and in the Wa Self-Administered Division of Shan State.¹ A detailed 2025 study found the Akeu in Myanmar inhabit 908 households in 32 villages.² Their bamboo houses, which tend to be built near the top of mountains, are situated in villages near the juncture of four countries, all of which are inhabited by the Akeu. The majority (11,000) live in southwest China, 3,300 reside in Laos, and 400 in northern Thailand. Mongla Township has been transformed from a sleepy border town into a center for the production and trafficking of narcotics, gambling, prostitution, and illegal wildlife trade.³

Identity: Although the Akeu possess an identity, dress, and language distinct from the large Akha tribe spread across the same region, they do acknowledge historical kinship, and their genealogies prove the two groups were once related.⁴ In China, where their name is spelled Ake, they have been counted as part of the official Hani nationality with

about 20 other people groups.⁵ In Myanmar, the Akeu have long been viewed as a distinct tribe and numbered 1,343 people in the 1931 census.

Language: According to an ancient Akeu legend, “God chose a high priest to give His Word written on a buffalo skin. On his way home, rain made the buffalo skin wet, and it began to smell. The priest was afraid the writing would disappear, and the smell of the buffalo skin made him hungry, so he roasted the skin and ate it. The Akeu therefore say they carry the Word of God in their stomachs.”⁶ The Akeu had no written script until a Roman-based orthography was developed for them in 2005.⁷

History: The Akeu claim a history dating back at least 20 generations. The names on their ancestral tree are handed down orally from fathers to sons in a bid to ensure that future generations will not forget their past and lose their ethnic identity. Until recently, the slash-and-burn agricultural technique was widespread among the Akeu, causing them to relocate their villages every few years after exhausting the land. In addition,

outbreaks of malaria often decimated their communities in the past, but thankfully this threat has subsided in recent decades.

Customs: The Akeu lived in very isolated communities until recently, but now they grow rice, tea, sugarcane, cotton, and other crops and can be seen selling their wares or exchanging them with people at local markets. Because they had no written language, the Akeu “kept records and reminders by carving notches on wood, tying knots on rope, or counting beans.”⁸

Religion: Until the past few decades, most Akeu observed the spirit worship rituals of their ancestors, believing that to change would be deeply disrespectful to the generations that have gone before them and may upset the guardian spirits they have placated for centuries. When the 1931 census returned 1,343 Akeu people in Myanmar, just one individual identified as a Christian, and the rest were animists. That ratio has changed dramatically, however, and today half of Akeu people in Myanmar are Christians, slightly more than those who still practice Animism, while several dozen families have converted to Buddhism.

Christianity: The first known Akeu Christian was a man named Laipu, who heard the Gospel from a Wa evangelist who visited his village in the 1970s. Although the number of Christians among the Akeu was steadily increasing, the publication of their New Testament in 2015 provided a strong boost, with hundreds of Akeu committing their lives to Christ. A recent study found that 272 Akeu households in Myanmar are Evangelical Christians, 141 are Catholic, while 408 are animists and 38 families adhere to Buddhism.⁹ Notably for such a small tribe, the Jesus film has also been translated into Akeu. In Myanmar, Akha evangelists originally reached out to the Akeu, but after the first churches were established, Akeu believers have led the way in reaching their own people. The Akeu in China and Laos remain unreached.



Population
in Myanmar:
4,300 (2025)

Location:
Shan State

Language Family:
Tibeto-Burman

Main Religion:
Christianity (50.0%)

Christians:
2,150 (50.0%)

OVERVIEW

Population:
4,300 in Myanmar (2025 D. Laipu)
1,000 (2004 E. Johnson)
1,343 (1931 census)

Other Countries:
11,000 in China
3,300 in Laos
400 in Thailand

Other Names:
Akheu, Ake, Akhu, Aki, Ako,
Akui, Gaokheel

Location:
Shan State: Mongkhat, Mongla,
and Kengtung townships in
Kengtung District; Tachileik District;
Wa Self-Administered Division

Language:
Akeu [aeu]

Dialects: 0

Scripture:
New Testament 2015
Portions 2006

Jesus film: Akeu

Global Recordings:
Akeu #1148

People ID: 18899

