



John Michaels

Location: The previously unknown Banlon Gyi Karen tribe, who number 4,600 people, inhabit 920 households in 19 villages in the eastern part of Pyinmana Township in Myanmar’s Naypyidaw Territory. Naypyidaw is now the capital city of Myanmar, having been relocated from Yangon in 2005.¹ Pyinmana, which lies just two miles (3 km) east of Naypyidaw, was formerly a logging and sugarcane refinery town and served as the base for the Burma Army during the Second World War.

Identity: The Banlon Gyi people are one of four newly discovered Karen groups that were first visited by linguists in recent years,² who determined their language is distinct from all other Karen varieties in Myanmar. Each of the four new groups is nicknamed “Kayinbyu” (White Karen) by the Burmese and other ethnicities due to the predominant color of their women’s clothing. The Banlon Nge Karen people live in villages east and north of the Banlon Gyi, but the two groups retain distinct ethnic identities.

Language: Although the Banlon Gyi Karen were discovered and

documented by workers with the Summer Institute of Linguistics, their languages have not yet appeared in that organization’s *Ethnologue*. Consequently, these groups also have yet to be incorporated into the wider missions information world. Researchers found that only 2,000 (less than half) of Banlon Gyi Karen people can speak their native language, and Burmese is the preference of most younger people due to the influence of education and media. Approximately 400 of the 920 Banlon Gyi households reportedly have “vitality in their language.”³ Initial studies suggest the four new “White Karen” languages belong to the Northern Karenic group of the Tibeto-Burman family. Northern Karenic includes Lahta, Yinbaw, Yintale, Zayein, and the Kayan language spoken by the Padaung tribe.

History: In many areas of Myanmar, the Karen people have waged a long and brutal war against the Burmese government since 1948, with hundreds of thousands of their people raped and killed. As a result of the turmoil, and probably because of their prolonged proximity to Burmese communities, many of

the smaller Karen groups, such as the Banlon Gyi may not have been caught up in the conflict to the same extent as other Karen tribes.

Customs: Most Banlon Gyi Karen people are engaged in agriculture or forestry. When the people were asked about why they are commonly called “White Karen,” some said it implies that they are pure (innocent) Karen, having no sin. Others told a legend of a beautiful woman who was born with white skin and was hidden to avoid being claimed by the king.

Religion: Almost all Banlon Gyi Karen people are professing Buddhists, with some preferring their ancient animistic roots. They were converted to Buddhism by their Burmese neighbors before Christian missionaries reached the area, and they have remained embedded in their belief structure. In the early 20th century, missionary William Purser, who served over 40 years in Myanmar, warned about the appeal of Buddhism to some animistic tribes: “Year by year they are coming into closer contact with civilization, and if they do not become Christians, they will become Buddhists. They know that Buddhism is a nobler form of religion than Animism, and the tendency among them is to assume the language, dress, and religion of the Burmese. When they do this there is often a moral and intellectual advance, and a Karen who has become a Buddhist is generally a more convinced Buddhist than a Burman who has been one all his life, and humanly speaking, his conversion to Christianity is an impossibility.”⁴

Christianity: Contrary to many overseas sources that assume all Karen tribes in Myanmar have significant numbers of Christians, there are no known believers among or outreach to the Banlon Gyi Karen people. No Scripture or any other Christian resources have ever been produced in their language. Although many Karen people in other groups are strong followers of Jesus Christ, the Banlon Gyi have remained isolated from the Gospel.



Population
in Myanmar:
4,600 (2024)

Location:
Naypyidaw Territory

Language Family:
Tibeto-Burman

Main Religion:
Buddhism (85.0%)

Christians:
None known (0.0%)

OVERVIEW

Population:
4,600 in Myanmar (2024 SIL)

Other Countries:

Other Names:
White Karen, Kayinbyu, Karenbyu

Location:
Naypyidaw Territory:
Pyinmana Township

Language:
Karen, Banlon Gyi
[unclassified]

Dialects: 0

Scripture:
None

Jesus film:
None

Global Recordings:
None

People ID: 22498

