



Kirk Person

Location: Numbering just over 1,000 people in Myanmar, the Bisu inhabit just two villages (Namt Theun and Yaw Tan) within Mongyang Township in Shan State’s Kengtung District. Mongyang, which sits only about 20 miles (32 km) from the Chinese border, contains several other distinct tribes profiled in this book, including the Blang, Khun, Mok, and Muak Sa-aak. The earliest mentions of the Bisu people in Myanmar came in early censuses of Burma, with 473 “Pyin” people listed in 1931, all of whom were Buddhists or animists. Pyin or Pyen is often used to label this group, but their autonym is Bisu.

Identity: Identifying the Bisu people is a complex task, as several closely related groups exist that use different names, yet share close cultural, historical, and linguistic roots. Approximately 5,300 people known as the Laomian live across the border in China’s Yunnan Province, while 800 Bisu people dwell in northern Thailand’s Chiang Rai Province. Further east in the northern tip of Laos, 49,000 people

speak the Phunoi language, which is also related to Bisu, although Phunoi speakers do not use the ethnic name Bisu. The differences between these groups indicate that they were once one people who drifted apart over time as families migrated away from their homeland and established new communities.

Language: The Bisu language has three tones and is the only language in Myanmar that is part of the so-called Bisoid branch of the Tibeto-Burman family. Linguists have on one hand described Bisu, Pyen, and Laomian as “closely related and largely mutually intelligible,” while at the same time listing them as distinct languages.¹ Although the Bisu population is small, their language enjoys vigorous use within their community. Many Bisu people also speak Lahu or Shan as a second language, but only a few speak the national language, Burmese.

History: Bisu history has reportedly been one of “harassment and persecution at the hands of neighboring groups. The Bisu

migrated south along the Mekong River earlier this century, encountering hostile peoples wherever they went.”² Another source says: “The Bisu of Thailand say their ancestors may have been brought as war captives from their original homeland during the 18th or 19th centuries and may have once lived in a Bisu kingdom near Lamphun.”³

Customs: Today, the Bisu seek to live peacefully but are often harassed and called derogatory names by the dominant ethnic groups in the countries where they have settled. The Bisu have a closeknit community and seldom marry outside their group. In the rare case that someone does, they are forced to leave the village. Most Bisu women no longer wear their traditional dress but have adopted the clothing of neighboring groups.⁴

Religion: Among the Bisu in China and Thailand, “most aspects of village life revolve around their zealous appeasement of evil spirits. No sacrifice is spared to keep peace with the demanding demons. This traps the Bisu in dire poverty, as numerous valuable livestock are wasted in needless sacrifices.”⁵ Although many Bisu are nominally Buddhists, “their beliefs are still related to spiritual powers. They believe in the spirit of the village, water, trees, forest, and other natural surroundings. Bisu have a spirit house outside the village, where sacrifices of chickens and pigs are made on wedding days, before planting, and on other important occasions.... The village sorcerer, called *bhu dtang*, serves as a medium between the people and the spirits.”⁶

Christianity: While most Bisu families remain entrenched in Animism, Christianity has made more of an impact among the Bisu in Myanmar compared to the other countries they inhabit. Today it is believed that about one-third of Bisu people in Myanmar are Christians. The first ever portion of Scripture in the Bisu language was translated in 2011 using the Roman orthography, but no further work appears to have been undertaken.



Population
in Myanmar:
1,050 (2025)

Location:
Shan State

Language Family:
Tibeto-Burman

Main Religion:
Animism (45.0%)

Christians:
370 (35.0%)

OVERVIEW

Population:
1,050 in Myanmar
(2025 Asia Harvest)
1,000 (2020 SIL)
473 (1931 census)

Other Countries:
5,300 Laomian in China
800 in Thailand

Other Names:
Hpinba, Hpyin, Laomin,
Laopian, Lua, Mbisu, Mibisu,
Misu, Phen, Pyen, Pyn

Location:
Shan State: Mongyang
Township in Kengtung District

Language:
Pyen [pyy]

Dialects:

Scripture:
Portions 2011

Jesus film: None

Global Recordings:
Pyen #15815

People ID: 14492

