

Eastern Bwe Karen Baptist



Location: More than 20,000 Bwe Karen people are distributed over a wide area of eastern Myanmar. The main concentration of about 100 Bwe Karen villages are in the Thandaunggyi Township in Kayin State. Others are found further north in Kayah State and in the Bago (formerly Pegu) Region. Because of the decades-long civil unrest in Myanmar, many Bwe Karen families have fled across the border to Thailand. More than 2,000 people still live as refugees there, while others have been allowed to settle in Western nations, including the United States, Finland, Australia, and Canada.

Identity: Although they have always been acknowledged as part of the wider Karen race, the Bwe’s distinct language and customs mean that they were counted as a separate group during the British colonial period. In 1911 the census divided the Bwe into nine subgroups, some of which are unknown today and others that have been profiled separately in this book, including the Padaung, Yinbaw, and Zayein. In 1931 the Bwe had a population of 6,316.¹

Language: The Bwe language is divided into two dialects, Eastern and Western Bwe. People from each region can usually understand one another despite vocabulary differences, but Western Bwe is more widely used and considered the more prestigious dialect.² Some Bwe people can also comprehend

Kayaw and Geba Karen, which shares a 82% lexical similarity with Bwe.³ A shift is underway in many Bwe communities, with Burmese and S’gaw Karen increasingly used by young people.

History: For centuries the Bwe Karen were considered “very wild and lawless,” with one book noting: “Every male belonging to this tribe has the rising sun tattooed in bright vermilion on his back, stretching from side to side across the shoulders.... They are diminishing in number owing to the ravages of smallpox.”⁴ The Gospel was first proclaimed to the Bwe Karen in 1853 by missionary Francis Mason and his wife, who wrote, “These people are much more lawless than the S’gaw or Pwo Karen, and before we came were ever om a chronic state of warfare.”⁵ They saw an immediate response, and by 1857 mission reports listed 42 Bwe churches with 2,640 believers.⁶ Education also played a key role in transforming Bwe society. By 1857 the missionaries had already established 101 village schools with 2,420 students.⁷ The schools helped lift many Bwe out of material and spiritual poverty, providing them God-given purpose and dignity as a people.

Customs: Prior to the conversion of some Bwe to Christianity, they were feared by other tribes, and in a state of constant hostility with the Geko Karen, the Paku Karen, and

the Kayah. In one book it was noted: “They are wilder and fiercer in their habits than other Karen tribes, and the country in which they live is very mountainous. The construction of their dwellings is peculiar, each village consisting of a single house, built like a bazaar, with rooms on each side of a walk with runs the whole length of the building.”⁸

Religion: Early missionaries remarked on the difficulty in reaching the Bwe Karen, with one saying: “They are spirit-worshippers who live crudely, stupidly, continuously drunken, at the starvation point. What little crops their rough mountains will yield they spend on gambling and lust.... The Catholics have made some converts among them, but these drink as much as before, and pay hardly any attention to Sunday church going.”⁹ Some families, especially those in more remote rural villages, have chosen to keep worshipping the spirits, but most Bwe people today are committed Christians.

Christianity: Despite the up-and-down progress of the Gospel among the Bwe Karen, today around two-thirds of Bwe people are Christians, with most of them attending Baptist churches. Portions of the Bible were translated into Bwe Karen in 1857, but by then the entire Bible had been translated into S’gaw Karen, and Bwe Christians have used it ever since, even though it is not in their heart language.



Population
in Myanmar:
21,000 (2024)

Location:
Kayin State, Bago
Region, Kayah State

Language Family:
Tibeto-Burman

Main Religion:
Christianity (65.0%)

Christians:
13,650 (65.0%)

OVERVIEW

Population:
21,000 in Myanmar
(2024 Joshua Project)
17,200 (1997 Ethnologue)
6,316 (1931 census)

Other Countries:
2,200 in Thailand
Also in USA, Finland,
Australia, Canada

Other Names:
Baghi, Bghai, Bghai Karen,
Bhwe, Bhweh, Blimaw, Dareh,
Manaw, Red Karen

Location:
Kayin State: Thandaunggyi
Township in Hpa-An District;
Bago Region: Taunggoo District;
Kayah State: Hpruso Township
in Loikaw District

Language:
Karen, Bwe [bwe]

Dialects: 2

Scripture: Portions 1857

Jesus film: None

Global Recordings:
Karen Bwe #414

People ID: 14533

