



Geba Karen Association

**Location:** The 46,000 Geba Karen people are distributed over a wide area of east-central Myanmar, inhabiting five different states and territories. The greatest concentration occupies 140 villages in the Thandaunggyi Township of Kayin State. Others live in the Bago Region’s Taungoo District; Dekkhina District in Naypyitaw Territory; Pekon and Pinlaung townships in Shan State; and Loikaw, Demoso, and Hpruso townships in Kayah State. The Geba Karen homeland is characterized by rugged mountains and deep ravines, with numerous rivers crisscrossing the region.

**Identity:** The Geba Karen have long been recognized as a distinct subgroup of the larger Karen race in Myanmar and are one of at least five tribes the Burmese call Karenbyu, meaning “White Karen.” The 1931 census listed 16,187 Geba people, of whom 13,307 (82.2%) were Christians.

**Language:** The Geba Karen language has three dialects and is related to Bwe Karen, Kayaw, and other Central Karenic varieties. Although a Roman orthography was created to give the Geba a written language in 1870, it is only used by Catholics today. A Geba orthography using the Burmese alphabet has been used by Anglican and Baptist church members since 2002. The local Baptist administration has combined Geko and Geba Karen together, but their languages

are different, with each group possessing its own ethnic and cultural identity.

**History:** Taungoo in Bago Region is home to many Geba Karen. For decades it was considered a lawless district, which the British avoided, until everything changed when Jesus Christ moved into people’s hearts. A British officer, Donald Smeaton, wrote: “Taungoo was occupied by British troops in 1853. At that time nearly the whole of the Karen tribes on the mountain east of Taungoo...were in a savage state. The Burmese government never had authority over any of the tribes.... In process of time, from the constant labor of the missionaries, many thousands of the mountain Karens were instructed in Christianity, abandoned their savage mode of their life and their cruel wars and lived as Christian men and women.”<sup>1</sup>

**Customs:** The Geba and other Karen tribes were in large part eager to embrace Christianity because, remarkably, God had preserved ancient beliefs in their culture about a lost book that would one day be returned to them. A Karen chief said, “The Karen once had books. God gave His Word, written on leather, and we lost it; but our ancestors told us that the white foreigner also had God’s Word, and would come and give it to the Karens.... Give us God’s book, that happiness may return to the Karens.”<sup>2</sup>

**Religion:** For centuries the Geba Karen appeased demonic spirits through a complex set of animistic rituals. Their constant animal sacrifices to the spirits left them poor and bound, but when they first trusted in Christ the hearts of thousands of Geba people were transformed. Today almost nine out of ten Geba Karen families are Christians (mostly Baptist, Catholic, and Anglican), and only a small number of Geba people living in remote villages still adhere to Animism.

**Christianity:** The first Karen Christian, Ko Thah Byu, was converted by the famous American pioneer missionary Adoniram Judson. After his baptism in 1828, Ko was so burdened to share Christ with other Karen people that he set out for the mountains, proclaiming the Good News in every village he entered. Missionary Francis Mason noted that in 1835 he left Ko at Pegu (now Bago) “preaching among about 2,000 Karens who live in that vicinity.”<sup>3</sup> It’s possible the Geba Karen living in Bago first heard the Gospel from the mouth of “the Karen Apostle” in the earliest days of the faith among his race.<sup>4</sup> After the first portions of the Bible were translated into their language in 1870, the Geba Karen had a very long wait for the rest of the Scriptures. A further century and a half elapsed before they finally obtained the New Testament in 2021! Nonetheless, many Geba Karen have remained committed followers of Christ.



**Population**  
in Myanmar:  
46,000 (2024)

**Location:** Kayin State,  
Bago Region, Naypyitaw  
Territory, Shan State,  
Kayah State

**Language Family:**  
Tibeto-Burman

**Main Religion:**  
Christianity (86.0%)

**Christians:**  
39,560 (86.0%)

OVERVIEW

**Population:**  
46,000 in Myanmar (2024  
Asia Harvest) 40,000 (2010  
Geba Literature & Culture)  
16,187 (1931 census)

Other Countries:

**Other Names:**  
Daneh, Kaba, Karenbyu,  
Kebbar, Kono, Koo-ong,  
Northern Bwe, White Karen

**Location:**  
Kayin State: Thandaunggyi  
Township; Bago Region:  
Taungoo District; Naypyitaw  
Territory: Dekkhina District;  
Shan State: Pekon and  
Pinlaung townships; Kayah  
State: Loikaw, Demoso, and  
Hpruso townships

**Language:** Karen, Geba [kvq]

**Dialects:** 3

**Scripture:** New Testament 2021  
Portions 1870

**Jesus film:** None

**Global Recordings:**  
Karen, Geba #11616

**People ID:** 11853

