



Location: Despite having a population of less than 20,000 people, the Geko Karen are dispersed over a large area in five states and regions of central-eastern Myanmar. Most are found in the Taungoo District in Bago (formerly Pegu) Region, with dozens of other Geko villages in parts of the Mandalay Region and in Kayin, Kayah, and Shan states.

Identity: The Geko Karen, who consist of three subgroups each of which speaks its own dialect, are also called "Kadaw" by some other tribes, which means "people from beyond the hills." The 1931 census of Burma returned 3,829 "Geko" people, of whom an astonishing 3,567 (93.2%) identified as Christians and the rest as animists. The Geko and Geba Karen groups live in many of the same areas and have been grouped together for administrative purposes by the Baptist Church, but they speak two distinct languages.

Language: The Geko Karen language, which is part of the

Central Karenic branch of the Tibeto-Burman family, has three tones and enjoys vigorous use in their communities. Many people also speak S'gaw Karen or Burmese as a second trade language. Some researchers consider Geko to be a subgroup or clan of the Padaung tribe.

History: Since time immemorial, the ancestors of the Karen people had passed down oral stories that told of creation, the fall of man, and the Tower of Babel, among other things.¹ In 1830, before they had heard the Gospel or had ever seen a Bible, some Karen elders told missionary Francis Mason this creation story: "God created heaven and earth. He created the sun, the moon, and the stars. Then He created man from the earth. He then created a woman by taking a rib out of the man. Then the creation of men and women was finished. He created again, making food and drink. He created rice, water, and fire. He also created cows, elephants and birds. Then the creation of the animals was finished."²

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Customs: For centuries the Geko Karen have lived simple lives, growing crops on their mountains and hunting and fishing. Due to inter-tribal warfare, many of their villages were built along mountain ridges to protect from raids while offering clear views of any approaching raiders. The main adversaries of the Geko were the Paku and Bwe Karen, although the powerful Kayah "looked impartially on the contending parties and plundered each as convenient opportunities offered."³

Religion: For countless centuries before they became Christians, the Karen groups preserved belief in a Supreme being, Y'wa. They had lost contact with Him and His teachings, however, so that when the first missionary engaged them in the 1830s, he reported: "They believe in one god, who is good, but who has little to do with the world at present. They also believe in spirits, good and bad, and in a personal devil, who is the author of all the evil and suffering of life. This devil and the evil spirits are the principal objects of their worship, as they think thus to appease them, and so avoid the harm they might afflict."⁴

Christianity: Approximately 80 percent of Geko Karen are Christians today, meeting in dozens of small church fellowships scattered throughout their territory. After the American missionary Moses Bixby passed through their area in the mid-1850s from his base in Taungoo, it was said: "He was instrumental in bringing the Geko and other tribes into peaceful relations.... Several Karen churches were planted among the mountain people."⁵ Although the Geko Karen language exists in written form using the Roman script, no Scripture has ever been translated into Geko. An audio presentation of the Gospel in Geko was made many years ago by the missionary organization Global Recordings, although it appears that few people have heard it.



Population in Myanmar:
19,000 (2024)

Location:
Bago Region, Mandalay Region, Kayin State, Kayah State, Shan State

Language Family:
Tibeto-Burman

Main Religion:
Christianity (80.0%)

Christians:
15,200 (80.0%)

OVERVIEW

Population:
19,000 in Myanmar
(2024 Joshua Project)
17,000 (2010 Ethnologue)
3,829 (1931 census)

Other Countries:

Other Names: Gaikho, Gayho, Geckho, Gecko, Geker, Gekho, Gekkho, Geko, Geko Kayah, Gek'o, Gekhol, Gekhu, Geko, Kadaw, Kakhau, Kayan Kakhau, Kayan Kakhong, Kekaungdu, Kekhong, Keku, Yathu Geko

Location: Bago Region; Taungoo District; Mandalay Region: Yamethin District in southern Mandalay; Kayin State: Thandaunggyi Township; Kayah State: Loikaw, Demoso, Hpruso, and Hpasaung townships; Shan State: Pekon Township

Language: Karen, Geko [ghk]

Dialects: 3

Scripture: None

Jesus film: None

Global Recordings:
Karen, Geko #11617

People ID: 11881

