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Population
in Myanmar:
10,000 (2025)

Location:
Sagaing Region

Language Family:
Tibeto-Burman

Main Religion:
Buddhism (85.0%)

Christians:
500 (5.0%)

Location: With a population of 10,000, the little-known Kanan people group inhabits 24 villages in the mountains of the Sagaing Region in northwest Myanmar, predominantly along the banks of the upper reaches of the Mu River in Banmauk Township. A few Kanan villages are also found in the townships of Indaw, Pinlebu, and Homalin.¹ Due to assimilation, the Kanan population has remained relatively static for almost a century, with the 1931 census returning 7,182 “Ganan” people.

Identity: The Kanan are not to be confused with the Kaman, a Muslim group of 50,000 people in Rakhine State. Some reports indicate the Kanan may be in decline as they are being assimilated into surrounding peoples, including the large Kadu ethnic group who live northeast of the Kanan. Both the Kanan and Kadu say they are historically related but had separated many generations ago.

Language: The spoken Kanan language, which enjoys vigorous use among their communities, has never had a written form. This has led to most of the Kanan adopting the Burmese script. Although studies show that Kanan has an 84 percent lexical similarity with Kadu, comprehension is low between the two languages,² both of which are

classified as part of the Asakian branch of the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family.

History: The Kanan once dwelt on the steamy plains before moving to their current mountain abodes centuries ago. One scholar has asked: “They were almost certainly part of the literate Pyu kingdom before they fled to their redoubt in the hills. Like a great many other hill peoples, the Kanan retain many of the cultural practices and beliefs of the lowland peoples with whom they were once associated..... Why, then, did they not also bring literacy and texts along with them?”³

Customs: Although “the Kanan and Kadu are similar in many ways in their language, cultural traditions, and everyday life, they differ in the way they construct their homes, and the traditional skirt of Kanan women is completely black.... Kanan people frequently travel to other villages for business and visiting. There is also much intermarriage between geographically close Kanan villages.”⁴

Religion: Although almost all Kanan people claim to be Buddhists, their beliefs are mixed with animistic rituals and the worship of *nats*, or spirits, which is officially banned in Buddhism. Buddhist temples are scattered throughout the Kanan area, and

it is considered prestigious for a family to send a child to serve as a novice monk or nun. At the time of the 1931 census, all Kanan people identified as Buddhists except 23 “others,” who were probably animists. Not a single Kanan person was a Christian.

Christianity: The Church of Christ first sent missionaries to the Sagaing Region in the last two decades of the 19th century, but there is no record of them specifically targeting the Kanan. In 1959, the United Pentecostal Church in Mizoram, India, sent missionaries across the border, where they established fellowships in several places including among the Kanan.⁵ The UPC are considered a sect or cult by the Baptists and other denominations, however, and their work never flourished. Although approximately 500 Kanan people are thought to be Christians today, most members of this group have never heard the Gospel in a way that allows them to intelligently accept or reject Christ. No Scripture has ever been translated into Kanan, and the only resource they have available in their vernacular is an audio Gospel recording. While some Christian sources indicate the Kanan people are “very resistant” to the Gospel, it may simply be that they have never heard it.

OVERVIEW

Population:
10,000 in Myanmar
(2025 Joshua Project)
9,000 (2007 SIL)
7,182 (1931 census)

Other Countries:

Other Names:
Ganaan, Ganan, Ganang, Ganon, Genan, Kamein, Kana, Kanan

Location:
Sagaing Region: Banmauk and Indaw townships in Katha District; Pinlebu Township in Kailin District; Homalin Township in Khamti District.

Language:
Kanan [zkn]

Dialects: 0

Scripture:
None

Jesus film:
None

Global Recordings:
Ganaan #11294

People ID: 20535

