



Paul Hattaway

**Location:** The Khampa are one of the four main branches of the Tibetan race, but few people realize they are found in Myanmar. Numbering just over 1,000 people, they inhabit nine villages at the extreme northern tip of Myanmar, in an alpine part of Kachin State near the juncture where Myanmar, India and China meet. The largest community of Khampa Tibetans in Myanmar live in Tahaundam village, which is situated within the remote Naung Mun Township.<sup>1</sup> The area is home to gushing rivers and snowcapped mountains, including Hkakabo Razi, the tallest peak in Southeast Asia at 19,925 feet (5,881 meters) above sea level. To the north, the altitude changes dramatically, with the floor of the Dulongjiang Canyon over twice as deep as the Grand Canyon in Arizona. In recent years about 50 Khampa Tibetan families have come down from the mountains and now live near Putao Township.

**Identity:** In Tibetan, the suffix *pa* means “people,” thus the term Khampa indicates people from the Kham region of Tibet. The number of Tibetans in Myanmar is difficult to estimate as some of

them are transient, coming and going across the border as they conduct trade and move their livestock to better pastures. In this isolated part of Asia, political boundaries mean little to the local people. The Khampa in Myanmar speak the Southern Kham variety of Tibetan, which is also spoken by more than 120,000 people in Chinese-controlled Tibet and by 1,700 people in two enclaves of eastern Bhutan. Many Khampa Tibetan refugees also live in India and Nepal, but most are speakers of the Eastern and Western Khampa languages, whereas this group in Myanmar speaks Southern Khampa.

**Language:** Kham Tibetan is divided into four distinct languages (Eastern, Northern, Southern, and Western), each of which is distributed over vast areas of the Tibetan Plateau. Southern Kham has four tones but is only partly intelligible with other Tibetan varieties. It reportedly shares 86 percent lexical similarity with Central Tibetan and 72 percent with Amdo Tibetan.<sup>2</sup>

**History:** For centuries the fierce Khampa raided neighboring tribes

in northern Myanmar, plundering their possessions and carrying off slaves.<sup>3</sup> Groups like the Taron and Derung lived in terror of the Khampa, who didn’t hesitate to murder their victims if they failed to cooperate. The Myanmar authorities have often struggled to classify the unruly Tibetans within their borders. In the early 1990s a dispute resulted in the Tibetans having their Myanmar citizenship revoked, forcing most to move across the border into China. Some have since officially returned, while others come and go as they please.

**Customs:** Many Khampa Tibetans are nomads, regularly moving their yaks and other livestock over vast distances of sparsely populated grazing land. The Khampa have a reputation as bloodthirsty warriors, having spent centuries as the guardians of the Tibetan border regions with China.

**Religion:** Tibetan Buddhism forms the very core of Khampa identity. Many men serve as monks for extended periods. The subsequent lack of men in the community has resulted in some nomads practicing polyandry, which may take many forms, including situations when multiple siblings sleep with the same woman when they return home. In some cases, “a single woman is selected and married to five or six brothers as a common wife, or the eldest brother’s wife is also utilized as a wife by his younger brothers.”<sup>4</sup>

**Christianity:** Although all Khampa Tibetan people in Myanmar are professing Buddhists, across the border in the region straddling Tibet and China’s Yunnan Province “there were 1,610 Tibetan Catholic converts in the area by 1922.”<sup>5</sup> Missionaries with the Paris Foreign Missionary Society lovingly worked in the area since the mid-19th century, with many spilling their blood on Tibetan soil.<sup>6</sup> According to the Tibetan Catholic priest, Lu Rendi, in 1998 there were 6,500 Tibetan Catholics in southeast Tibet and at least 3,000 more in neighboring areas of Yunnan Province.<sup>7</sup>



Population  
in Myanmar:  
1,150 (2025)

Location:  
Kachin State

Language Family:  
Tibeto-Burman

Main Religion:  
Buddhism (100.0%)

Christians:  
None known (0.0%)

## OVERVIEW

Population:  
1,150 in Myanmar  
(2025 Asia Harvest)

Other Countries:  
121,000 in China  
1,700 in Bhutan

Other Names:  
Deqen Tibetans, Khamba, Khams

Location:  
Kachin State: Naung Mun and Putao townships in Putao District

Language:  
Tibetan, Khams [khg]

Dialects:  
1

Scripture:  
New Testament 2020

Jesus film:  
Tibetan, Khams

Global Recordings:  
Kham #2508

People ID: 18697

