



Dionisio

Location: The little-known 12,000 Lahta people inhabit rugged pine-forested terrain in central-east Myanmar. They are found in the Dekkhina District of the newly established Naypyitaw Union Territory, and west of Pekon and Pinlaung townships in Shan State. For decades Pekon has served as a supply hub for the Myanmar military, resulting in the town being repeatedly bombed to repel the Karen Nationalities Defense Force, who recognize its strategic importance. In January 2024 the Karen claimed control of Pekon during the civil war.

Identity: Socially and culturally, the Lahta are related to the Padaung people, but their languages are not mutually intelligible. The Lahta (meaning "people from the north") are called "Taru" by Kayah people, while the Shan call them "Zayein," which means "King Karen." At the time of the 1911 census the Lahta numbered 4,981 people, but by 1931 their population had fallen to 3,736. Of them, only 34 were Christians, with the rest identifying

as animists or Buddhists.

Language: Lahta, which is part of the Northern Karenic branch of Tibeto-Burman, is related to the Kayan language spoken by the Padaung tribe. The first missionary among the Lahta, Francis Mason, wrote in 1859: "Their language in sound is more guttural than either Shan or Pa-O or Kayah, and quite distinct from them. I worked over their language, and found it remarkably like Pwo Karen, with some of their words almost identical."¹ Although Lahta enjoys vigorous use in their community, many young people increasingly prefer to use Burmese, Kayan, or Pa-O.

History: Even though they speak a different language, the Lahta people have long been considered part of the larger Padaung group, who have a population approximately ten times larger than that of the Lahta. An early missionary wrote, "They are said to be somewhat more advanced in the arts of civilization than others and they seem to have

held to their religion [Animism] in its purity.... They are said to believe in seven worlds, three above and three below, and all worse than this; so that, in dying, they expect to go inevitably to a worse place than they leave."²

Customs: Lahta women typically wear white jackets over red skirts, with conical white hats worn by both men and women. All Lahta women love to adorn themselves with dozens of necklaces and beads, even while working in the fields. A visitor noted, "They wear traditional brass coils from the wrist to the elbow, making arm movements difficult. Food has to be tossed into the mouth as the forearms cannot bend."³ Lahta parents arrange marriages when their children are small, but if a couple decides they do not want to marry, they are driven from the community and forced to survive together in the jungle without societal help. Entire villages exist of couples who eloped against the wishes of their parents.⁴

Religion: When missionaries first engaged the Lahta people in the 19th century, most were still animists, but their religious beliefs were evolving. Edmund Merriam observed in 1893: "They are generally spirit- or demon-worshippers and are very superstitious, but they do not seem to be so firmly attached to their religion as do the Burmans. Buddhism, as well as Christianity, is gaining many converts from their ranks."⁵ During the missionary era, a battle ensued to see if the Lahta would turn to Christ or Buddha.⁶ Influenced by their neighbors, today about half of the Lahta people are Buddhists, while less than one-fifth profess Christ, many of whom are nominal believers. The remainder holds to their animistic roots.

Christianity: The Padaung have had many Catholic and Baptist church members since the mid-19th century. Their influence extended to the Lahta, who have a few thousand professing believers today. No part of the Bible has ever been produced in the Lahta language, although translation work is reportedly underway.



Population in Myanmar:
12,000 (2024)

Location:
Naypyitaw Territory,
Shan State

Language Family:
Tibeto-Burman

Main Religion:
Buddhism (50.0%)

Christians:
2,160 (18.0%)

OVERVIEW

Population:
12,000 in Myanmar
(2024 Joshua Project)
11,800 (2017 J. Leclerc)
9,550 (2000 Ethnologue)
3,736 (1931 census)

Other Countries:

Other Names:
Gaungtou, Karen Lahta, Kayan Lahta, Khahta, Khaungtou, Lahta Karen, Lahta-Zayein Karen, Leththa, Peu, Taru, Tarulakhi, Turu, Yan Wohta, Zayein, Zayein Karen

Location:
Naypyitaw Territory;
Dekkhina District; Shan State:
Pekon and Pinlaung townships
in Taunggyi District

Language:
Lahta [kvt]

Dialects: 1

Scripture: None

Jesus film: None

Global Recordings:
Lahta #11618

People ID: 22378

