



Matt Hahnwald

Location: With approximately 22,000 people in northern Myanmar near the Chinese border, the Lahu Shi Balan are distributed in four townships that comprise the Kengtung, Tachileik, and Mongyawng districts. An estimated 43,000 Lahu Shi Balan people dwell across the border in China's Yunnan Province, while others live in northern Thailand, where they are known as the Lahu Shi Balah or Banlan. In Laos, the Lahu Shi fought alongside the United States during the "secret war" of the 1960s and 1970s against the Communist Pathet Lao and Viet Cong in Laos and Vietnam, respectively. Hundreds of Lahu Shi refugees were subsequently welcomed to the U.S., with many initially settling in the Visalia, California, area. Today more than 2,300 Lahu Shi people call America home.

Identity: Two distinct Lahu Shi dialect groups exist in Myanmar: the Lahu Shi Bakeo and the smaller Lahu Shi Balan. The forefathers of the Lahu Shi Bakeo migrated straight into Myanmar from China, but the Balan first crossed into Laos, from where some traveled across the Mekong River to their current locations, while others moved

south into Thailand. The Lahu Baptist Convention has actively discouraged the differences between groups, saying, "There is no White, Red, Yellow, or Black Lahu as we serve together for the sake of the Gospel."¹ While this stance may appear spiritual, it ignores the reality that the Lahu groups speak distinct languages and observe different customs.

Language: Although linguists consider the Lahu Shi in Myanmar to speak one vernacular, a Lahu Shi Balan Christian recently said, "We do not have mutual understanding when we speak with Lahu Shi Bakeo people."² Speakers of the two varieties have limited comprehension of the widespread Lahu Na language, which is spoken by 225,000 people in Myanmar. Together, these varieties form part of the so-called Central Ngwi branch of the Tibeto-Burman language family.

History: After suffering catastrophic military defeats in the late 18th century, thousands of Lahu Shi families in southwest China fled the Han and Tai overlords who had oppressed them for many generations. Since that time, the Lahu Shi have been despised by other Lahu and have

experienced periods of intense hardship. In China, "many died from starvation and from being attacked by wild animals and disease. Between 1947 and 1949 alone, a third of the village population succumbed."³

Customs: The Lahu Shi "are renowned for their traditional skills as hunters and trappers, practices important not just for subsistence but also for cultural identity, with hunting dogs being highly valued.... House structures are closely tied to the terrain and their traditional livelihood, reflecting their adaptation to the mountainous environment. Villages are often situated on high ridges or hilltops, and their traditional homes are built on stilts (elevated wooden or bamboo piles) to protect the living space from dampness and snakes, and to provide a shaded area for working and for keeping domestic animals."⁴

Religion: Of the two Lahu Shi groups in Myanmar, the Balan have a higher percentage of Christians, with almost all members of the tribe today identifying as followers of Christ. Only a small number of villages still cling to their animistic traditions, and many young people in those communities have embraced Jesus Christ after evangelistic campaigns among them in recent years. There are no adherents of Buddhism among the Lahu Shi in Myanmar, although they are surrounded by strong Theravada Buddhist groups.

Christianity: Although the Lahu Shi New Testament was published in 2015, in a misguided bid to "avoid disunity," most Lahu Shi believers have been encouraged by the Lahu Baptist Convention to use the standard Lahu Bible, despite difficulties in comprehension. A local Lahu Shi Balan Christian explained the awkward situation: "We continue to use the Lahu Na Bible, which is the common and widely accepted translation. At the same time, it is a very good thing that a Lahu Shi Bible exists."⁵ Specific Gospel audio resources have been developed in the Lahu Shi Balan dialect.



Population
in Myanmar:
21,700 (2026)

Location:
Shan State

Language Family:
Tibeto-Burman

Main Religion:
Christianity (90.0%)

Christians:
19,500 (90.0%)

OVERVIEW

Population:
21,700 in Myanmar
(2026 Asia Harvest)

Other Countries:
43,000 in China
16,000 in Thailand
3,800 in Laos
2,300 in USA

Other Names:
Balah, Ba Lan, Banlan, Kui, Kui Song, Kur, Kwi, Lahu Shi Balah, Lahu Shi Banlan, Mousseur Luang, Yellow Lahu,

Location:
Shan State: Kengtung Township in Kengtung District; Tachileik and Monghyak townships in Tachileik District; Mongyawng Township in Mongyawng District

Language:
Lahu Shi [lhi]

Dialects:

Scripture:
New Testament 2015
Portions 2009

Jesus film: None

Global Recordings:
Lahu Shi Balan #20145
Lahu Shi #20400

People ID: 22658

