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Location: The 17,000 Laitu Chin people inhabit a sizeable area in southwest Myanmar. They are located “along the banks of the Lemro River and its tributaries north and south of Mrauk-U in Rakhine State and Chin State. Their villages range from a few houses to a few hundred houses and lie between the river and the mountains, both of which are considered important for their livelihood.”¹

Identity: The Laitu Chin have been recognized by the government in Myanmar for nearly a century, with the 1931 census returning 1,530 Laitu people, all of whom were animists. They are rare among the 61 Chin tribes in Myanmar in that most of the Laitu are Buddhists rather than Christians, and the majority live outside of Chin State.

Language: Linguists conducted a survey of the Laitu areas in 2007 and found that all tribe members could speak their language, which amounted to 15,000 speakers at the time. Most can also speak the main regional language, Rakhine. There is significant diversity among Laitu speakers, with eight dialects identified. SIL noted: “Laitu is somewhat intelligible with Sumtu, Uppu and Songlai Chin, but other factors block comprehension since they must use another language to communicate.”²

History: Originally, the Laitu were “warrior hill tribes who lived in small groups. They moved down to the

banks of the Lemro River in the 4th century AD and began to live together in larger villages.”³ Laitu girls traditionally received face tattoos at puberty. The custom is said to have started after a Burmese king “was so impressed by a woman’s beauty that he kidnapped her to take as a bride. Because of this, Laitu families began to tattoo their daughters to ensure they would not be taken away. Other tales say that the tattooing was done for beauty, and perhaps more plausibly, to differentiate the different tribes in case one was kidnapped by another.”⁴ Disaster struck the Laitu area in November 2011, when all 567 permanent shops in the market area of Minbya Township were burned to the ground as a fire swept through the neighborhood. During the civil war in 2023 and 2024, the Burmese government lost control of the Mrauk-U District as it was taken over by the Rakhine Army.

Customs: The pattern of Laitu women’s face tattoos often resembles a spider web, with a circle within a square on the forehead and concentric lines covering the entire face. One source lamented: “The Laitu Chin people have lost much of their traditional culture, and the tattooed ladies are some of the last remaining visible cultural assets. The women are the last generation who will ever have these tattoos, which they received to mark their coming of age, given

that the then military junta ruling the country banned them in 1976.”⁵

Religion: After centuries of influence from the neighboring Rakhine people, around 60 percent of Laitu Chin people today adhere to Buddhism, although only a few Laitu men have become monks, with the Rakhine running the temples. An estimated one-fourth of Laitu people are Christians, especially those living in southern Chin State, while the remainder still practice the animistic rituals of their forefathers, which predate the arrival of both Buddhism and Christianity.

Christianity: It appears that no early missionary work was conducted in the Laitu areas, with a 1917 book stating: “The unadministered territory has a population of at least 30,000. There has never been a missionary of any denomination among them.”⁶ Efforts to reach this group have generally found the animistic Laitu to be more receptive to the Gospel, while Buddhist Laitu are more resistant. When it was suggested that a literacy program might benefit the members of the tribe, the Buddhist leaders strongly opposed the plan, as they were “suspicious of Laitu literature and feared it was a ploy to convert them to Christianity.”⁷ Without any Scripture in their language, preaching in Laitu church services is done in Burmese and they use the Burmese Bible, although announcements are made in Laitu.



Population
in Myanmar:
17,000 (2024)

Location:
Rakhine State,
Chin State

Language Family:
Tibeto-Burman

Main Religion:
Buddhism (60.0%)

Christians:
4,250 (25.0%)

OVERVIEW

Population:
17,000 in Myanmar
(2024 Joshua Project)
15,000 (2007 SIL)
1,530 (1931 census)

Other Countries:

Other Names:
Daitu, Hio Bei, Hle-tu, Laikhy,
Laitu, Laitu Kheu, Ledu, Leitu

Location:
Rakhine State: Mrauk-U,
Minbya, and Myebon townships
in Mrauk-U District;
Chin State: Paletwa Township
in Matupi District

Language:
Chin, Laitu [clj]

Dialects: 8

Scripture:
None

Jesus film:
None

Global Recordings:
Chin, Laitu #22515

People ID: 20558

