



Jon Arnold

**Location:** One of the smallest tribes in western Myanmar is the 400-strong Lama people who live in several villages surrounding the town of Pangsau, which lies within Lahe Township, immediately adjacent to the border with India. The village of Woktham is home to 12 Lama households, while small numbers of families also live in Yaungngwi and Takhet villages. The first motorbike-accessible road through this area was just completed in 2010. Before then, “travel was only possible on foot. Thus, many of these villages are remote and have little contact with groups beyond their closest neighbors.”<sup>1</sup> A small number of Lama people also live across the nearby border in Arunachal Pradesh, India, where they are called “Hehle” by people from the Mungre and Moshang tribes.

**Identity:** The Lama people of Myanmar have never previously appeared on any lists of the country’s ethnic groups, and subsequently they have not been known to the Christian world, although they are a distinct people

loved by God. The Lama are considered part of the Tangshang cluster of tribes, which in turn form an arm of the Naga cultural and linguistic group that includes over 100 different people groups. While this tribe is known by different names in other dialects in both Myanmar and India, the people of the tribe themselves insist their name is Lama.

**Language:** The Lama vernacular was a special variety lost in a sea of languages in this diverse part of Myanmar until a team of linguists traveled to Pangsau in 2013. They surveyed 125 Lama people and, after comparing word lists, concluded that Lama is different from yet related to three other Tangshang varieties: Bote, Haqkhu, and Haqkhun. It appears to be most closely related to Bote, yet the two dialects still have significant vocabulary differences.<sup>2</sup> Researchers have also compared word lists from Lama communities on both sides of the border and found that they share only an 87 percent lexical similarity. This suggests the Lama in India

migrated there at least a few generations ago and the languages have since diverged.<sup>3</sup>

**History:** The Lama are one of 19 small tribes labeled “Tangsa” that are located across the border in the northeast Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. They will be profiled in our future *Operation India* series of books. Tellingly, all the Tangsa groups in India say they migrated there from Myanmar, while oral traditions suggest they originated in southwest China or Tibet, possibly commencing their journey south in the early 13th century.

**Customs:** A shortage of fresh water is a major challenge for the Lama and other tribes in Lahe Township, as their villages are located on mountain slopes that hinder the construction of wells. Most people collect rainwater as their only source of water. Lahe is an impoverished area, with 96 percent of homes constructed with bamboo, and firewood is their only source of heating. In 2014, 59.5 percent of people in Lahe were officially stateless, not considered citizens of Myanmar or any other country.<sup>4</sup>

**Religion:** After centuries of darkness, as their ancestors lived and died enslaved by evil spirits, the religious landscape among the Lama and other tribes in Lahe Township began to shift when the first preachers arrived in the 1950s. Over the following several decades Christian influence gradually grew, with Chin, Kachin, and Naga missionaries leading the way. Today almost all Lama people are Christians who belong to Baptist churches.

**Christianity:** Lama Christians may have struggled to grow in faith and knowledge as a result of not having the Bible in a language they can easily understand. Ten of 15 Lama believers said that at some stage of their lives they had heard someone reading from the Tangsa New Testament printed in India, although “It is not clear from this data how much was read, how well it was read, or how long ago they heard it.”<sup>5</sup>



**Population in Myanmar:** 400 (2025)

**Location:** Sagaing Region

**Language Family:** Tibeto-Burman

**Main Religion:** Christianity (85.0%)

**Christians:** 340 (85.0%)

OVERVIEW

**Population:** 400 in Myanmar (2025 Asia Harvest)

**Other Countries:** 150 in India

**Other Names:** Haqlang, Hehle, Heqle, Lama Tangshang

**Location:** Sagaing Region: Lahe Township in the Naga Self-Administered Zone

**Language:** Naga Tangsa, Lama [unclassified]

**Dialects:**

**Scripture:** None

**Jesus film:** None

**Global Recordings:** None

**People ID:** 22537

