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Location: Most of the 5,100 members of the Black Lisu tribe in Myanmar live in the high mountains of northern Kachin State near where the country’s borders meet both India and China. Putao and Myitkyina townships are the main Black Lisu centers in Myanmar. Across the border in southwest China, 25,000 Black Lisu inhabit remote villages in the upper reaches of the Mekong and Salween river valleys, which the Chinese call Lancang and Nujiang, respectively. Until the 1930s, the rugged and remote Nujiang Canyon remained a blank area on maps, which even Chinese troops refused to enter.

Identity: The Black Lisu, who are so named because of the predominant color of their women’s vests, differ from other Lisu subgroups in Myanmar. They are considered the most divergent Lisu group due to being isolated in the high mountains. Also called “Highland Lisu,” they have retained their own customs, dress, and dialect.

Language: The Black Lisu speak

their own variety of Lisu. *The Ethnologue* notes that among the Lisu in Myanmar there is “much dialectal variation, and some Lisu do not understand each other.”¹ Some Black Lisu speak Kachin Jingpo or Rawang if they live near those groups. Except for Christians who have learned to read the Bible, few Black Lisu can read the unique Lisu script, which was invented by a Karen preacher named Sara Ba Thaw in 1915 and improved by the famous missionary James Fraser before the first Scripture portions were published in 1921.

History: The Black Lisu were hidden away from the world and largely unknown until two British explorers, George Forrest and George Litton, dared to enter their territory in 1905. It was said of the duo’s journey: “In the deepest of all gorges, almost 500 meters (1,640 feet) below the level of the Mekong River, tropical diseases were endemic, killing scores of explorers and traders. And those not struck down by malaria often fell prey to the Black Lisu, a fierce

tribe controlling the Nujiang’s upper reaches.”²

Customs: In the 1960s, the renowned *Encyclopedia Britannica* described this tribe’s culture and lifestyle: “The Black Lisu, living highest up in the Salween River valley, were least assimilated. They wore coarse clothes of homespun hemp, while the other Lisu dressed in colorful and elaborate garments. In their migrations the Lisu have kept to the highest parts of hill ranges. Their houses are made of wood and bamboo. Crossbows, poisoned arrows, and dogs are used for hunting. They have a clan organization, and marriage is always between members of two different clans.”³

Religion: Almost all Lisu who dwell at lower elevations have embraced Christianity, but many Black Lisu still practice animistic rituals. Their traditional religion is said to “combine ancestor veneration with animism and includes gods of earth and sky, wind, lightning, and forest.”⁴ Although estimates are almost impossible to make due to the extreme remoteness of their territory, just over half of Black Lisu people in Myanmar are believed to be Christians today, compared to the larger Lisu group of whom about nine out of ten people are followers of Jesus.

Christianity: A rich Christian history exists among the Lisu. Some of the lesser-known missionaries who were greatly used by God include Leonard and Olive Bolton, who impacted the Lisu on both sides of the border in the 1920s and 1930s. They were the first Assemblies of God missionaries to Myanmar. When many of the Lisu in China fled the Communist atrocities of the 1930s, “they took with them their Scriptures, hymnbooks, and vibrant testimonies and became part of the Myanmar Church.”⁵ A succession of later missionaries helped strengthen the faith of Black Lisu believers, including Clifford and Lavada Morrison, who helped the Lisu churches see the spiritual needs of the Rawang and other unevangelized tribes.⁶



Population
in Myanmar:
5,100 (2025)

Location:
Kachin State

Language Family:
Tibeto-Burman

Main Religion:
Christianity (55.0%)

Christians:
2,800 (55.0%)

OVERVIEW

Population:
5,100 in Myanmar
(2025 Joshua Project)

Other Countries:
25,000 in China

Other Names:
Black Lisaw, Hei Lisu, Highland Lisu

Location:
Kachin State: Putao Township in Putao District and Myitkyina Township in Myitkyina District

Language:
Lisu [lis]

Dialects:

Scripture:
Bible 1968
New Testament 1938
Portions 1921

Jesus film:
Lisu

Global Recordings:
Lisu, Hei: Luquan #20900

People ID: 13072

