



Giampiero Gandolfo

**Location:** More than 280,000 members of the Myeik ethnic group inhabit areas in the extreme south of Myanmar. They are concentrated in all four townships of Tanintharyi District and further south in Kawthaung District, which marks the extreme southern tip of Myanmar. The Myeik area is bordered by Thailand to the east, while the Mergui Archipelago stretches so far that northern Malaysia, Indonesia, and the India-controlled Andaman and Nicobar Islands are not far across the crystal-clear waters of the Andaman Sea.

**Identity:** The Myeik people are known as Beik in Burmese, Marit in Thai, and traditionally they were called the Mergui or Merguese people in English. Although they have appeared in census returns of Myanmar for over a century (with a population of 95,453 in 1931), in recent decades they dropped off most lists of the country's ethnic groups due to their language being considered a mere dialect of Burmese. In reality, the Myeik possess a proud ethnic identity, and both they and other people in the region view them as a distinct group with their own customs and history.

**Language:** Although it is considered one of only four dialects of Burmese, Myeik structurally differs from standard Burmese due to the presence of "27 consonant phonemes," which are sounds that differentiate the meaning of one word from another.<sup>1</sup> One source has

described Myeik as "a divergent dialect of Burmese.... It shares many commonalities with Dawei (Tavoyan), although there are substantial differences especially with regard to phonology."<sup>2</sup> In 2016, an Australian linguist noted that "special attention is needed to assist Myeik children in bridging the gap between their mother tongue and the standard Myanmar language."<sup>3</sup> The Mergui vernacular is also spoken across the border in Thailand, where they are considered part of the 830,000 Burmese people living in that country.

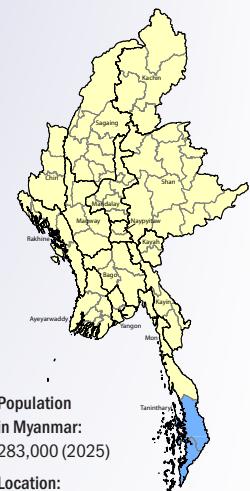
**History:** Although this remote part of Myanmar was first settled by Malay sailors from the south, the coastal areas remained largely uninhabited until the 20th century, with many pirates and slave-traders operating in the waters. Despite its idyllic setting, the area has not escaped the attention of the vicious Burmese junta in recent decades, with many fishermen needlessly killed by Myanmar's blood-thirsty rulers. In May 1998, the entire population of Christie Island was massacred by Colonel Zaw Min because he objected to people gathering bamboo for firewood.<sup>4</sup>

**Customs:** Agriculture and fishing are the two main occupations of the Myeik people, as their communities tend to be located either in the interior hills of the Tanintharyi Region or on the long coast of the Mergui Archipelago, which consists of more than 800 islands.<sup>5</sup> Deer, monkeys, and wild

boars are found throughout the area, while numerous species of tropical birds, including hornbills, add color and sound to the sky.

**Religion:** The iron grip that Buddhism has on the Myeik people was shown in the 1931 census returns, when the population of 95,453 included just 145 Christians and 62 followers of "other religions," while the remaining 95,246 Myeik people proudly declared they were followers of Buddha. Little has changed since that time, and the Myeik area is dotted with numerous Buddhist temples, monasteries, and pagodas.

**Christianity:** The history of the Gospel among the Myeik people is similar to its history among other Buddhist peoples in Myanmar in that missionaries came to their area early but found them resistant compared to animist tribal people. Mission work invariably gravitated toward the "low-hanging fruit," and the Buddhist groups were ignored. In this case, when American Baptist Durlin Brayton and his wife first came to Myeik in 1839 they found the Pwo Karen people in the area were on the verge of revival. The Braytons focused on reaching the Karen until they left the district in 1854. Today, less than half of one percent of Myeik people are Christians. Until now, the Myeik have not appeared on Christian lists of Myanmar's peoples, and consequently, few people have ever prayed for their salvation or attempted to reach them for Christ.



Population  
in Myanmar:  
283,000 (2025)

Location:  
Tanintharyi Region

Language Family:  
Tibeto-Burman

Main Religion:  
Buddhism (99.7%)

Christians:  
850 (0.3%)

## OVERVIEW

**Population:**  
283,000 in Myanmar  
(2025 Asia Harvest)  
250,000 (2007 D. Bradley)  
95,453 (1931 census)

**Other Countries:**  
Thailand

**Other Names:**  
Beik, Marat, Merguese,  
Mergui, Merguese

**Location:**  
Tanintharyi Region: Myeik, Kyunsu, Palaw, and Tanintharyi townships in Tanintharyi District; Kawthaung Township in Kawthaung District.

**Language:**  
Burmese [mya]

**Dialects:** 1

**Scripture:**  
Burmese Bible 1835  
New Testament 1832  
Portions 1815

**Jesus film:** None

**Global Recordings:**  
Beik #8539

**People ID:** 22571

