



Location: Numbering 160,000 people, the Rumai are the least populous of the three Palaung language groups in northern Myanmar. Most are located in three districts of northern Shan State, generally from Lashio north to the Chinese border. Palaung Rumai communities are also found in the Bhamo District of neighboring Kachin State. An additional 6,200 Rumai people live across the border in China's Yunnan Province, where they are one of several tribes combined to form the official De'ang minority group.

Identity: The Palaung Rumai appear to share many cultural similarities with the Riang Lang and may be offshoots of the same original tribe. Both groups believe that "their first ancestor, Phu Sawti, was hatched from a serpent's egg—the result of a union between a female serpent-god and a spirit."¹ Women display this belief by their unique appearance. From their early teens,

"the women wear 40 or 50 cane hoops apiece, one resting upon another to a depth of a foot around their hips."²

Language: The Palaung Rumai language, which has four tones, is related to, yet distinct from, Palaung Pale and Palaung Shwe. Speakers of each language share some words and expressions but must revert to a common language such as Shan to effectively communicate with each other. There are dialect differences between the Rumai vernacular spoken in Lashio and that spoken in Namkham, but comprehension between the two areas is satisfactory. Most Palaung Rumai people also use Burmese, Shan and Kachin Jingpo, depending on which group they interact with, while they use the Burmese script for writing.

History: The Palaung claim to be the original inhabitants of Myanmar. Chinese records show that they were living along the

Nujiang River in northwest Yunnan Province as early as the 2nd century BC and that the Palaung have been living in Myanmar for 2,000 years.³ The Palaung living in China today are probably the descendants of small groups of people who migrated across the border into Yunnan to escape fighting between the British and tribal peoples in the early 1900s.

Customs: Many Palaung Rumai people earn a living in simple agriculture and low-skilled manual jobs, such as collecting tea leaves. The Rumai have a traditional drum they call the *gelengdang*, which is made from a hollowed tree trunk. Its ends are covered with ox hides. Before using it, they fill it with water "through a hole in its body to make the ox-hide and inside of the drum damp to produce the desired resonance."⁴

Religion: Despite their conversion to the Theravada sect of Buddhism many centuries ago, the Palaung Rumai retain many of their pre-Buddhist animistic and shamanistic rituals. Many Buddhist monks also act as village shamans, who sometimes enter into a trance to contact the spirit world. Like most Buddhists, the Palaung Rumai believe that fate predetermines the events of their lives. This results in their having little concern about changing their ways.

Christianity: Most Palaung Rumai people view Christianity as a foreign religion. They believe they have the truth in Buddhism and are fearful of the spiritual consequences should they change their religion and stop appeasing the demons that they and their ancestors have been enslaved to for centuries. Today, only a tiny fraction of Palaung Rumai people follow Jesus Christ, with some estimates putting the number at a mere half of one percent of the population. Due to a determined effort by a group of Christians, the Jesus film is available in the Palaung Rumai language. At the time of writing this profile the Palaung Rumai New Testament is being translated, with ten books completed.⁵



Population in Myanmar:
160,000 (2025)

Location:
Shan State,
Kachin State

Language Family:
Austro-Asiatic

Main Religion:
Buddhism (98.0%)

Christians:
800 (0.5%)

OVERVIEW

Population:
160,000 in Myanmar
(2025 Joshua Project)
158,000 (2017 J. Leclerc)
135,000 (1977 Voegelin
& Voegelin)

Other Countries:
6,200 in China

Other Names:
Humai, Ngwe Palaung, Rumai, Shan
Rumai, Ta'ang Rumai, Tai Rumai

Location:
Shan State: Muse, Namkham,
and Hsenwi townships in Muse
District, and Namhsan and Manton
townships in the Palaung Self-
Administered Zone; Kachin State:
Bhamo and Mansi townships in
Bhamo District

Language:
Palaung, Rumai [rbb]

Dialects: 2

Scripture:
Portions 2018

Jesus film:
Palaung, Rumai

Global Recordings:
Palaung, Rumai #15421

People ID: 14590

