

PAUNGNYUAN NAGA



Jon Arnold

Location: With a population approaching 5,000 people, the Paungnyuan Nagas inhabit 13 villages within Lahe and Hkamti townships near the border between western Myanmar's Sagaing Region and India. Lahe, which contains families from at least nine different Naga tribes, is "rugged and rocky with deep valleys and swift streams. Due to the mountainous terrain, transportation and communication are a challenge."¹ In 2012, the largest Paungnyuan villages were Khale (123 households), Yunthang (100), Santung (100), Makyam (96), and Lungkhan (86).² Most of these villages have been established for centuries, but many have decreased in population as people have moved away in search of better land. Makyam Village (the original center of the tribe) had 120 homes in it when they were visited by the Defence Department in 1942, but only 96 houses remain there today.

Identity: This tribe is often called Makyam or Macham, after one of their primary villages, but their ethnic and language name

is Paungnyuan, which means "village leaders." Because they live to the east of the Lainong Naga, many outsiders assume they are a subgroup of Lainong, but their languages are markedly different despite their cultural similarities. In fact, some Paungnyuan families moved away from the Lainong and formed their own communities because the language barrier between the two groups led to misunderstandings.

Language: A 2012 linguistic team found there were 4,361 Paungnyuan Naga people living in 623 households of Lahe Township and nearby Dunghi town. Their language is spoken by all members of the tribe, and while many of the older generation can speak Lainong Naga as a second language, young people today prefer to learn Burmese as it is more useful to their careers. Lexical studies reveal that Paungnyuan is not closely related to any other Naga language. It shares only 31% similarity with Ponyo-Gongwang Naga, 29% with Lainong, and 27% with Lao Naga.³

History: The mountains where the

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Paungnyuan make their home used to be verdant and full of wildlife, but generations of slash-and-burn agriculture has left the terrain barren. The people "cultivate two to three years in an area and then move to another place. They leave the soil for about ten years and when it is again ready for cultivation, they come back to the previous fields to plant. They live this way all year round."⁴

Customs: Because accessing water is often difficult in the mountains, the Paungnyuan struggle to grow food, although beans, corn, yams, rice, and maize are produced in the Lahe area. One visitor remarked that "the men enjoy hunting and fishing, while the women collect edible leaves and cultivate the fields."⁵ In some areas, Paungnyuan men reportedly wear "black cloths bordered with white lines and covered with lines of red rectangles."⁶

Religion: Before many Paungnyuan families converted to Christianity in the 1980s, they were spirit-appeasing animists who lived in fear of vengeful demons. Their valuable animals were sacrificed to the spirits, which kept many people trapped in poverty. A major annual festival called kwe pwe was held where "each village would sacrifice what they could afford. In one festival held at Hkalai, six mithun, four buffalo, ten cows, and eight pigs were offered up...with a priest offering a prayer to the spirits for a good and bountiful harvest."⁷

Christianity: Although there are a small number of Buddhists and animists among them today, most Paungnyuan people are professing Christians who attend Baptist or Church of Christ fellowships. Although an orthography based on the Roman script was developed in 2016, no part of the Bible has yet been translated into Paungnyuan. Believers use the Burmese Bible and songbooks, although many struggle to understand the words. Other church activities, including the preaching, praying, and announcements, are done in the Paungnyuan tongue.



Population
in Myanmar:
4,800 (2025)

Location:
Sagaing Region

Language Family:
Tibeto-Burman

Main Religion:
Christianity (85.0%)

Christians:
4,080 (85.0%)

OVERVIEW

Population:
4,800 in Myanmar (2025 Asia Harvest)
4,316 (2012 Naga Survey Team)

Other Countries:

Other Names:
Lacham, Lasam, M'kang,
Macham, Magan, Makhyan,
Makyam, Naga Makyam,
Pongnyon, Pongnyun

Location:
Sagaing Region: Lahe Township in the
Naga Self-Administered Zone; Hkamti
Township in Hkamti District

Language:
Naga, Paungnyuan [umn]

Dialects: 1

Scripture: None

Jesus film: None

Global Recordings: None

People ID: 18961

