

PONYO NAGA

ပုန်ညါ နာဂ



Worawan Simarogj

Location: Distributed over 30 villages on the Myanmar side of the border with India, more than 10,000 Ponyo Naga people live in Lahe Township within the large Sagaing Region, which is home to dozens of distinct tribes and people groups. Ponyo Naga territory “is a broad belt stretching from the headwaters of the Namtaik River near the Indian border down to the Chindwin River.”¹ Several hundred Ponyo people also live across the border in northeast India. Some fled there recently to escape the chaos of the Myanmar civil war, while others moved for their children’s education or for business opportunities.

Identity: The Ponyo are so closely related to the smaller Gongwang tribe that scholars have combined their dialects to form a new language called Ponyo-Gongwang Naga. The two tribes maintain a distinct identity, however, and although outsiders have no hesitation in labeling them as one, “both groups deny

a connection.”² The Ponyo do acknowledge historical links with the Lainong and Khiamniungan Naga tribes. Ponyo men have been described as “tall and of muscular physique. Their discipline, pride, and communal spirit gave them the reputation as the most impressive of Naga warriors.”³

Language: Ponyo is one of several Naga languages in western Myanmar related to Northern Chin varieties, suggesting a historical link between the two. Scholars have found that Ponyo shares an 89% lexical similarity with Gongwang, 69% with Lainong, and 67% with Khiamniungan Naga.⁴ Despite vocabulary differences, most Ponyo people can communicate in all three of these neighboring vernaculars. Ponyo is spoken by all tribe members, and a Roman-based script has been used by them since 2014.

History: The Ponyo appear to come from the same root as today’s Gongwang and Lainong

Naga tribes, as all three groups acknowledge Noklak in India as their place of origin. Their ancestors “reputedly emerged from a hole in the ground and then moved eastwards, crossing the mountains near Ponyo Noakang to a flattened area where the people gathered after crossing.”⁵ The Ponyo decided to remain there, but the other two tribes continued and settled in other areas. For centuries, special tattoos were given to warriors who took human heads. In 1927, a British army captain met one Ponyo man “who had taken so many heads that he had almost run out of space, and having filled his chest, back, arms, and legs, resorted to tattooing figures on his cheeks.”⁶

Customs: Headhunting raids were often launched in retaliation for an attack or insult, while a strong desire to appease the spirits undergirded the dark practice. In 1936, the Ponyo joined forces with their Gongwang counterparts and raided the Khiamniungan village of Pangsa, returning with 188 human heads and many prisoners of war.⁷ The village of Ponyo Noakang, which sits on the international border, “enjoyed a dubious reputation as the prime route for captives destined for human sacrifice in Myanmar.”⁸

Religion: After centuries of devotion to demons that caused the Ponyo Nagas to live in bondage and violence, they began converting to Christianity in the 1970s, and today an estimated 60% of the tribe are followers of Jesus. There are also significant numbers of Buddhists among them, while many families continue to observe the animistic rituals of their forefathers.

Christianity: The spiritual growth of Ponyo Naga Christians in Myanmar has been hampered by a complete lack of Scripture or any other Christian resources in their heart language. Burmese Bibles are used, but many Ponyo people, especially the elderly, have limited understanding of the Burmese language.



Population
in Myanmar:
10,200 (2025)

Location:
Sagaing Region

Language Family:
Tibeto-Burman

Main Religion:
Christianity (60.0%)

Christians:
6,100 (60.0%)

OVERVIEW

Population:
10,200 in Myanmar
(2025 Asia Harvest)

Other Countries:
650 in India

Other Names:
Mannok, Pongniu, Pongnyo, Ponyiu, Ponyo-Makon, Pounyiu, Pounyu, Pounyu-Manok

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

Language:
Naga, Ponyo-Gongwang [npg]

Dialects: 2

Scripture: None

Jesus film: None

Global Recordings: None

People ID: 20574

