

PWO KAREN (EASTERN)

ပိုး ကရင်(အရှေ့)



Population
in Myanmar:
1,181,000 (2024)

Location:
Kayin State, Bago Region,
Tanintharyi Region

Language Family:
Tibeto-Burman

Main Religion:
Buddhism (60.0%)

Christians:
236,000 (20.0%)

Location: Approximately 1.2 million Eastern Pwo Karen people are distributed over a long, narrow strip of eastern Myanmar, from most of Kayin State in the north to all five districts in the Tanintharyi Region, which extends hundreds of miles along the Thai border to the very southern tip of Myanmar.² Due to decades of armed conflict with the Burmese military, tens of thousands of Pwo Karen have fled to refugee camps in Thailand, many of which were later resettled as refugees in countries around the world. The Eastern Pwo Karen are the fifth most populous ethnic group in Myanmar, with only the Burmese, Shan, Rakhine, and S’gaw Karen boasting higher populations.

Identity: The 1931 census returned 487,824 Pwo Karen people, although that figure combined both Eastern and Western Pwo. The two groups have been profiled separately in this book because they have markedly different languages. A political, social, and linguistic divide has also emerged between the Eastern Pwo Karen in Myanmar and Thailand, as the two communities have drifted in different directions.

Language: Eastern Pwo Karen, which has seven dialects, shares only a 63 percent lexical similarity with Western Pwo, which is about the same correlation that English has with German. Beginning in 1830, a millennial sect called Leke

arose among the Pwo Karen. The adherents of this sect created a unique orthography. Today, the Burmese script is commonly used among the Eastern Pwo Karen, while those on the Thailand side of the border use the Thai script.

History: For centuries, Karen people believed that one day a long-absent “white brother would return to them from across the great waters, bringing the lost book which they had looked for with unabated expectation.”³ These beliefs caused many Pwo Karen people to eagerly embrace the teachings of the Bible when it was introduced to them by missionaries and the first Karen Christians. Legends of the Garden of Eden and the fall of mankind also closely mirrored the biblical account.⁴

Customs: Most Eastern Pwo Karen are rural farmers who live simple lives, growing rice and vegetables and raising livestock. Decades of brutal warfare has caused massive displacement among the Pwo Karen, with approximately one-third of the population being forced to relocate due to the conflict. This disintegration of their communities has caused a breakdown of many traditional Pwo Karen cultural practices.

Religion: Buddhism is practiced by most Eastern Pwo Karen, especially those living in the Tanintharyi Region who have had centuries of interaction with strong Buddhist

groups like the Mon, Dawei, and Burmese. Various cults and sects have arisen among the people over the years. Currently, a sect known as Telekhon exists in remote areas. It combines Buddhist and Christian teachings and is led by a prophet known as Phu Chaik, or “Grandfather Buddha.” At the time of the 1931 census, 32,014 (6.6%) of Pwo Karen people were Christians and 92.6% were Buddhists, reflecting the firm grip that Buddhism already had among this group.

Christianity: The Eastern Pwo Karen in the Bago Region heard the Gospel from the first Karen Christian, Ko Tha Byu. He preached from 1828 to his death in 1840 from rheumatic fever, leaving behind 1,270 Karen converts.⁵ Establishing the faith was not easy, however, and many Pwo believers were severely persecuted and some killed by the Burmese authorities.⁶ In 1837 a mission press was sent to Dawei to meet the demand for printed matter,⁷ and by 1856 the total number of Baptist church members among the Karen had risen to 11,878, and by 1919 to 55,353.⁸ For decades the press printed the Word of God in various languages, including the full Pwo Karen Bible in 1883.⁹ In recent decades, the need for a revised translation led to the publishing in 1994 of the New Testament in modern Eastern Pwo Karen.

OVERVIEW

Population:
1,181,000 in Myanmar
(2024 Joshua Project)
1,000,000 (1998 SIL)
487,824 (1931 census)

Other Countries:
58,000 in Thailand¹
Also in Australia, Canada, USA

Other Names:
Phlong, Phlou, Pho, Poe, Pwo
Omkoï Karen, White Karen

Location:
Kayin State: Hpapun, Hp-An,
Myawaddy, Kawkareik, and
Kyondoe districts; Bago Region:
Bago Township and Taunggoo
District; Tanintharyi Region:
Dawei, Myeik, Bokpyin, and
Kawthoung districts

Language:
Karen, Pwo Eastern [kjp]

Dialects: 7

Scripture: Bible 1883
New Testament 1994
Portions 2002

Jesus film:
Karen, Pwo Eastern

Global Recordings:
Karen, Pwo Eastern #2403

People ID: 15395

