

Photo: Nigel Pavitt



Location: Myanmar is home to approximately 2.6 million Rakhine people, although their population is difficult to gauge and estimates vary greatly.¹ Living at the gateway between Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent, most Rakhine live in the state of Myanmar that bears their name, which until 1989 was known as Arakan. They are concentrated along a thin strip of land consisting of “hilly coastal areas, crisscrossed by multiple rivers. It receives a great amount of rainfall and is largely covered by jungle.”² Thousands of Rakhine refugees today live in India, Bangladesh, Malaysia, and in various Western nations.

Identity: The Rakhine are one of the ancient peoples of Myanmar, with some saying their history dates to the beginning of humanity. A 19th century scholar found a Rakhine record that describes “the emergence of the world from the water of a deluge, and the appearance of beings who were the progenitors of the human race.”³ According to one legend, the first inhabitants of the region were a dark-skinned people known as the Bilu (“ogre” in Burmese), and the name of the state probably derives from Rakkhapura, meaning “land of the ogres.”⁴

Language: The Rakhine language is closely related to Burmese and uses the Burmese alphabet. It has been described as “one of the better-known varieties of nonstandard Burmese with profound pronunciation and vocabulary differences.”⁵ Although

almost all Rakhine people speak their native language, recently there has been a shift toward using Burmese, especially in southern parts of the state.

History: The Rakhine people are thought to have been in their present homeland for about three millennia, and they claim to have written records of over 100 kings who have ruled the area for more than 3,000 years. One account notes: “The oldest records of the sea route from China to Western Asia identify the country named Argire by Ptolemy (c. AD 100 - 170) with Rakhine, the name supposedly derived from silver mines existing there.”⁶ Rakhine was ceded to the British in 1826, but they found governing the state difficult, with one colonial writer describing the Rakhine as “difficult, intolerably lazy, arrogant in the extreme, and frightfully indifferent to the claims of their own Buddhist religion, and much more so to others.”⁷

Customs: Buddhism, which sits at the heart of all Rakhine culture, reached its zenith when the powerful kingdom of Mrauk-U ruled the area for 350 years until the 1780s. For a time, the kingdom was one of the wealthiest and most advanced on earth. In recent decades chaos has reigned in Rakhine State, with hundreds of thousands of people displaced and forced to flee as refugees to Bangladesh and India. Since the start of the 2021 civil war, the Arakan Resistance Army has become one of the most effective

rebel armies in Myanmar and has seized most of the state from Burmese control.⁸

Religion: Ancient Rakhine people worshiped the sun and moon, but after King Sanda Thuriya adopted Buddhism between 580 and 520 BC, they have remained strong Buddhists to the present day, with thousands of Buddhist temples and pagodas dotted throughout the region. The religion has shaped Rakhine identity to such a degree that most people agree that “to be Rakhine is to be Buddhist.”

Christianity: The first missionaries among the Rakhine were American Baptists Grover and Sarah Comstock, who arrived at Kyaukphyu in 1835. The first church was planted two years later, but Sarah and their two children succumbed to disease in 1843.⁹ Grover died the following year, aged 35. A summary of the Baptist work lamented: “The heavy rainfall, the cholera and malaria, and the mangrove swamps presented great barriers to the mission. Seventeen missionaries died within 20 years. The work among the Rakhine is noted as a heroic failure.”¹⁰ Today the Rakhine remain one of the most unevangelized groups in Myanmar, with an estimated one in every 500 people professing to be a Christian. Although the first Gospel portions were printed in the Rakhine language in 1914, a further 111 years elapsed until the New Testament was finally published in 2025. The Rakhine remain a large, unreached people group forgotten by the Christian world.



Population in Myanmar: 2,588,100 (2025)
Location: Rakhine State, Chin State, Bago Region, Ayeyarwady Region, Yangon Region
Language Family: Tibeto-Burman
Main Religion: Buddhism (96.8%)
Christians: 5,200 (0.2%)

OVERVIEW

Population: 2,588,100 (2025 Asia Harvest)¹
2,396,952 (2014 census)
1,536,725 (1983 census)
303,704 (1931 census)
Other Countries: 53,000 in India¹¹
11,200 in Bangladesh¹²
10,000 in Malaysia
2,603 in USA
Other Names: Arakanese, Arracanese, Kaukadan, Rakhain, Rakhaing, Rakkhaine, Mogh, Moghi Rambree, Yangbye
Location: Rakhine State: all 17 townships and 7 districts; Chin State: Paletwa Township in Paletwa District; Bago Region: Shwegyin Township in Nyaunglebin District and Waw Township in Bago District; Ayeyarwady Region; Yangon Region
Language: Rakhine [rki]
Dialects: 9
Scripture: New Testament 2025
Portions 1914
Jesus film: Rakhine
Global Recordings: Rakhine #20464
People ID: 13207

