



Jane Sweeney

Location: Numbering 4,700 people in western Myanmar, the Tangkhul Nagas live in Leshi, Tamu, and Homalin townships in a dense jungle area historically called the Somra Tract, after the name of the first Tangkhul village in Myanmar. A recent visitor wrote: “It is hard to tell when the international border passes you by. A small green board with blue lettering marks the border—you can make out what it says only if you read Burmese, the English words on it being ‘horn,’ ‘right,’ and ‘drive.’ A big tree fallen over the road, a few meters into Myanmar, is a more dramatic marker of this ‘imagined boundary’ that separates more than 300 Tangkhul Naga villages into India and 33 into Myanmar.”¹ On the Manipur side, more than 200,000 Tangkhul people make up one of the largest Naga tribes in India, but they speak a different language from their counterparts in Myanmar, despite their identical names.

Identity: The Tangkhul are rare among Naga tribes in that they have appeared in official government lists of Myanmar’s ethnic groups for almost a century. They appear to call themselves “Khaw” in their

own vernacular, and their distinctive culture sets them apart from other Nagas in the region. In India, the Tangkhul Nagas have been described as a collection of tribes and clans rather than a cohesive ethnic group, with one visitor writing: “They are actually a hybrid, showing at least three sections of origin and customs.”² For many generations, Tangkhul men have worn a remarkably elaborate headdress, which is probably without equal in all of Asia. Each aspect of its design tells a story about Tangkhul life and history.³

Language: The Tangkhul language spoken in Myanmar is not closely related to any other Naga variety, including Tangkhul dialects across the border in India. Studies reveal that the Tangkhul spoken in Myanmar shares just 31% lexical similarity with Tangkhul in India, meaning that less than one-third of words are similar in both languages. Tangkhul also shares a 51% lexical similarity with Akyauang Ari Naga and 29% with Kokak Naga.⁴

History: The Tangkhul in Myanmar claim to have arrived in the area

after two brothers had a dispute. The younger brother, Rasu, “was defeated and moved eastward to found the village of Somra...around the end of the tenth century.”⁵ One reason why the Tangkhul consist of so many different dialect subgroups may be that they expanded by conquering smaller groups in warfare and absorbing them into the tribal collective.

Customs: Tangkhul women are regarded as strong and independent, with many said to “excel in prestigious arenas like the civil services and academia.... Even during headhunting days, women used to act as mediators and intervene in the face of a crisis.”⁶ They are also widely praised for their weaving skills, and Tangkhul products are sold throughout the region. In Leshi Township just a few years ago, “the Tangkhul still practiced the custom of paying the bridal price in the form of an axe, spear, a shawl, and a buffalo.”⁷

Religion: After centuries of worshipping evil spirits and practicing head-hunting, the Tangkhul Nagas gradually converted to Christ in Myanmar, and today approximately two-thirds are professing Christians, with the other third comprising Buddhists and animists. In India, an astonishing 98.1% of Tangkhul Naga people declared they were Christians at the time of the 2011 census.

Christianity: Although Scottish missionary William Pettigrew first preached the gospel among the Tangkhul Nagas in India in 1897,⁸ the message took years to penetrate the jungle into today’s Myanmar, with the 1931 census of Burma failing to number any Tangkhul Christians. The church developed separately on each side of the border. The Tangkhul in India have had the New Testament since 1927; however, in Myanmar, Tangkhul believers had to wait until 1989 before the Bible was finally translated based on the dialect spoken in Somra village. The Bibles are still used today, but it is very difficult for Tangkhul Naga Christians to access copies.



Population
in Myanmar:
4,700 (2025)

Location:
Sagaing Region

Language Family:
Tibeto-Burman

Main Religion:
Christianity (65.0%)

Christians:
3,050 (65.0%)

OVERVIEW

Population:
4,700 in Myanmar
(2025 Joshua Project)
4,000 (2024 SIL)
65 (1931 census)

Other Countries:
203,000 in India

Other Names:
Aswa, Eastern Tangkhul, Hogo Naga, Kaswa, Khaw, Lahupa, Somara, Somra, Tankhun, Thangkul, Thangkul, Uzonbok

Location:
Sagaing Region: Leshi Township in the Naga Self-Administered Zone; Tamu Township in Tamu District; Homalin Township in Homalin District

Language:
Naga, Tangkhul [ntx]

Dialects: 1

Scripture:
Bible 1989

Jesus film: None

Global Recordings:
Tangkhul Naga #770

People ID: 18214

