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Location: With a population approaching 10,000 people, the little-known Yinbaw tribe inhabit villages on the Kantarawadi and Bawlakhe plains in northern Kayah State, especially in Loikaw and Demoso districts. A small number spill over the state border into the Hsi Hseng Township in southern Shan State. The 1911 census of Burma returned just 911 Yinbaw people, but two decades later, in 1931, their numbers had markedly increased to 2,925.

Identity: Although they officially have been recognized as a distinct ethnic group in Myanmar for over 120 years, few people know about the Yinbaw tribe. While they acknowledge ancestry with the larger Kayan group, the Yinbaw are almost unique in that they live in the lowlands, while almost all other Karenic groups are renowned for dwelling in high mountains and dense jungles. One source says: “They call themselves Kangan, which means ‘plain-dwellers.’ Almost nothing

else has been recorded about them in historical texts.”¹

Language: The unwritten Yinbaw language is part of the Northern Karenic branch of the Tibeto-Burman family. It is reportedly similar to Kayan and Geko Karen.² It continues to enjoy strong use by all members of the tribe, although most Yinbaw are now bilingual in the national language, Burmese.

History: The area traditionally known as Kantarawadi was one of the principalities that make up today’s Kayah State. According to local tradition, in ancient times the Yinbaw area was under the authority of a Shan prince. In 1875 the British granted protectorate status to four nearby principalities. Kantarawadi, however, remained independent and without official protection.

Customs: Yinbaw women are distinguished by their wearing of black shirts, jackets, and headdresses overlaid by colorful pom-poms that frame their faces. Cowrie shells and old silver rupee

coins from India are utilized in elaborate necklaces. Yinbaw men also wear the colorful pom-pom hats and often have more of the decorations sewn onto their shorts. Once a year, between March and May, the Yinbaw celebrate a festival called Kathowbow, which is held to “ensure good luck and prevent famine and illness in the coming year. This custom is also practiced by the Kayah, Kayaw, and Kayan, although in many villages it has often been disrupted by continuing outbreaks of fighting with government forces.”³

Religion: From the time the Yinbaw first arrived in the area, they have practiced animism, placating the spirits by offering animal sacrifices to them in an attempt to secure peace and prosperity. Many Yinbaw converted to Christianity after the arrival of American Baptist missionaries in the mid-19th century, and today about one-third of the population remain followers of Jesus. Buddhism, however, has gained in prominence as the Yinbaw have been increasingly influenced by strong Buddhist groups such as the Shan, Pa-O, and Burmese.

Christianity: The Yinbaw were one of the Karen-related tribes in Myanmar that enthusiastically embraced the Gospel when they first heard it because the message aligned with their ancient traditions. Their beliefs included accounts of the creation, the fall of man, and the Tower of Babel where God confused the world’s languages.⁴ Another legend said: “Our younger brother, the white foreigner, will come to us from beyond the setting sun, and will bring us a golden book, which will teach us the way to happiness and heaven. Our younger brother, when he comes to us, will be clothed in garments of shining black and shining white.”⁵ Because of the expectations of these tribes, Baptist and Catholic missionaries encountered receptive hearts, and at the time of the 1931 census, 2,213 (75.7%) of Yinbaw people identified as Christians and the rest as animists.



Population in Myanmar: 9,400 (2024)

Location: Kayah State, Shan State

Language Family: Tibeto-Burman

Main Religion: Buddhism (40.0%)

Christians: 3,000 (32.0%)

OVERVIEW

Population: 9,400 in Myanmar (2024 Joshua Project) 9,240 (2017 J. Leclerc) 2,925 (1931 census)

Other Countries:

Other Names: Kangan, Kang-ngan, Kayan Kangan, Yeinbaw, Yinbaw Karen, Yinbaw Kayah

Location: Kayah State: Loikaw District, and Demoso and Hpruso townships in Demoso District; Shan State: Hsi Hseng Township in Taunggyi District

Language: Yinbaw [kuv]

Dialects: 0

Scripture: None

Jesus film: None

Global Recordings: Karen, Yinbaw #11638

People ID: 16040

