

The Eastern Kayah Li of Thailand & Myanmar



The Eastern Kayah Li are a Karenic ethnic group, most closely related to Western Kayah Li. The majority of Eastern Kayah Li live in eastern Kayah State in Myanmar, while a small population migrated to Mae Hong Son Province in western Thailand about 60 years ago and established permanent villages during the last 20-40 years. The Eastern and Western Kayah Li consider themselves to be ethnically one. The name "Kayah" is sometimes also used. However, "Kayah" may refer to not only the Kayah Li but also several related language groups that live in the same area of Myanmar. The name "Kayah Li" refers specifically to the Kayah Li, including Eastern, Western and other varieties.

The Eastern Kayah Li people in Thailand are rice farmers living in ten mostly homogenous Kayah Li villages in Mae Hong Son Province. While some have adopted Buddhism or Christianity, the majority of the Eastern Kayah Li practice traditional animism.

The current vitality of the Eastern Kayah Li language in Thailand appears to be strong. Eastern Kayah Li is the primary language of the home, and children can speak only Eastern Kayah Li before entering school. While most Eastern Kayah Li adults can also speak Shan, and those who have had education can also speak Central Thai, Eastern Kayah Li people continue to speak Eastern Kayah Li as their first and best language.

Primary Religion:

Traditional animism

Disciples (Matt 28:19):

1%

Churches:

1

Scripture Status (Matt 28:20):

None

Population (date):

260,000 Myanmar (2007)

98,000 Thailand (2007)



EASTERN KAYAH HOMELAND



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Have They Heard The Gospel?

Call Themselves Christian	1%
Jesus As Their God and Only Savior	1%
Comment	Most attend church regularly
Believe in Their Local Traditional Religion	99%
Comment	Many also adhere to Buddhism or mix Buddhism with Kayah Li traditional religion.
Is The Word Of God Translated?	No
Audio Gospel Recordings Available	Yes
Hindrances to Scripture Distribution	No political hindrance. Lack of interest in Christianity may be only hindrance.
How Have They Responded to the Gospel?	There are more believers or interested individuals each year.
Cross-Cultural Missionaries Needed	Yes. Linguist-missionaries could develop writing, promote literacy and translate Scripture.

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Group Description

Economics

Subsistence type

Farming

Occupation

The primary occupation is subsistence farming, usually paddy rice or dry rice fields, and occasionally growing other crops such as garlic. They also plant vegetables and hunt and gather food from the jungle. Those who do not own land often work as hired laborers, especially those who live in villages along the main road.

Modernization/Utilities

Electricity, running water, television, gas stoves, and motorcycles are used by many but not all.

Community Development

Clothing

Women wear traditional woven Kayah skirts, cotton tube skirts, or cotton trousers (depending on generation and personal preference), along with t-shirts or sleeveless cotton shirts. Many older women wear traditional beaded jewelry in bright colors and/or a cloth wrap on the head. Men wear plain trousers and t-shirts or polo-style shirts. The clothing of men and young people is identical to the clothing of the other people groups nearby.

Transportation

Walking, small motorcycles, public truck-buses.

Society and Culture

History of People Group

The Karen (the larger ethnic group to which the Kayah belong) entered Southeast Asia from the north, probably originating near the China-Tibet border. Sometime before the eighth century A.D., the Karen entered what is now upper Myanmar and northern Thailand, where most of them continue to live today. Most of the Karen settled in what is now Kayah State in Myanmar, and have spread out from there.

Education/Youth

Primary Schools

7

Comment

Schools to primary grade 6 located in 7 Kayah villages. Children in other villages go to school in nearby non-Kayah villages or towns.

Language of Instruction Early Years

Central Thai

Language of Textbooks Early Years

Central Thai

Language of Instruction Later Years

Central Thai

Language of Textbooks Later Years

Central Thai

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Number of Schools Greater Than 90%

Homogeneous

7

Comment

Most children have access to at least a grade 6 education; some have access to pre-school education; some have access to secondary education.

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Status of Christianity

Church Growth

Number of Churches

1

Comment

There are also White (Sgaw) Karen churches in two Kayah Li villages that are not currently targeting the Kayah Li community.

Number of Communities

10

Comment

10 Eastern Kayah Li permanent villages in Thailand. Also thousands of Kayah Li in two refugee camps on the Myanmar-Thailand border and many more living in Kayah State in Myanmar.

Religion and Responsiveness

Attitude to Christianity

Somewhat resistant

Comment

They do not actively persecute those who convert to Christianity.

Attitude to Religious Change

Somewhat resistant

Comment

The Kayah Li are very proud of their traditional religion and actively participate in yearly animistic rituals revolving around the agricultural cycles.

Religious Practices and Ceremonies

There are two main traditional religious ceremonies during the annual agricultural cycle. The first, called 'Ton Thi' in Thai, occurs in April-May. In this ceremony, they cut down a tree in order to make a pole, pour sour-flavored water on it, place woven decorations on top, and erect it alongside poles from previous years at the highest point in the village in hopes of appeasing the spirits for the upcoming year. The second ceremony, called 'Khao Tom' in Thai, occurs around September. In this ceremony, they cook packets of sticky rice wrapped in leaves and hang them at the entrance of the village in order to request a good harvest from the spirits.

Scripture

Comment

The Kayah Christians who can read Central Thai use the Central Thai Bible.

Mission and Churches

Organization 1

New Tribes Mission

Country of Origin

Philippines

Main Ministry

Church planting

Number of Congregations

1

Number of Expatriate Workers

2

Number of Workers Using

Local Language

2

Language Used by Workers

Eastern Kayah Li