

# Palaung, Rumai

More than 140,000 Rumai Palaung inhabit a widespread area of northern Shan State in northern Myanmar (formerly called Burma).<sup>1</sup> They live in mountains that are, on average, about 5,000 to 8,500 feet above sea level. Many Rumai Palaung earn a living in simple agriculture and low-skilled manual jobs, such as collecting tea leaves. Others are rumoured to be involved with the illicit drug trade that predominates in this part of Asia, close to the Golden Triangle. Between 4,000 and 5,000 Pale Palaung inhabit China's Yunnan Province, in Longchuan and Ruili counties a short distance from the China-Myanmar border.<sup>2</sup>

In China the Rumai Palaung have been

combined with the Pale Palaung, Shwe Palaung and Riang groups to form the official *De'ang* minority. The Rumai Palaung language is related to Shwe Palaung and Pale Palaung, yet it is distinct. Speakers from each language group share some words and expressions but must revert to a common language such as Shan in order to effectively communicate with one another. Rumai Palaung has been influenced by Tai languages such as Shan and Tai Mao much more than the three other Palaung varieties.

The Palaung people claim to be the original inhabitants of Myanmar. Chinese records show that they were living along the Nujiang River in north-west Yunnan Province as early as the 2nd century BC.<sup>3</sup> The Chinese also claim that the Palaung have been living in Myanmar for 2,000 years. Those

who remain in China today are probably the descendants of small groups of people who migrated across the border into Yunnan to escape fighting between the British and tribal peoples in the early 1900s.

The Rumai Palaung have a traditional drum they call the *gelengdang*, which is made from a hollowed tree trunk. Its ends are covered with ox hides. Before using it, they fill it with water 'through a hole in its body

to make the ox-hide and inside of the drum damp so that the desired resonance can be produced'.<sup>4</sup>

The Palaung believe that their first ancestor, Phu Sawti, was hatched from a serpent's egg. Their belief in this legend has contributed to the style of traditional dress worn by many Palaung women today. From their early teens, 'women wear

40 or 50 cane hoops apiece, one resting upon another to a depth of a foot around their hips. The undulating movement when they walk resembles a snake's motion.'<sup>5</sup>

There are probably more Christians among the Rumai Palaung than among any of the other Palaung groups, due to influences from the Kachin and other tribal Christians in northern Myanmar, yet the total number of believers among them amounts to only about one half of one per cent.

The Rumai Palaung still view Christianity as a strange religion. They believe that they have the truth in Buddhism, and they are fearful of the spiritual consequences if they should change their religion and stop appeasing the demons that they and their ancestors have been enslaved to for hundreds of years.



Cooperative Baptist Fellowship



**Population:**  
141,640 (2000)  
159,000 (2010)  
178,600 (2020)  
**Countries:** Myanmar, China  
**Buddhism:** Theravada  
**Christians:** 600

## Overview of the Rumai Palaung

**Other Names:** De'ang Rumai, Humai, Rumai, Ruomai, Black Palaung, Rummui, Rummui Palaung

**Population Sources:** 137,000 in Myanmar (2000, B Grimes)<sup>6</sup>  
4,640 in China (2000, P Hattaway)

**Language:** Austro-Asiatic, Mon-Khmer, Northern Mon-Khmer, Palaungic-Khmuic, Palaungic, Eastern Palaungic, Palaung

**Dialects:** 0

**Professing Buddhists:** 98%

**Practising Buddhists:** 70%

**Christians:** 0.4%

**Scripture:** none

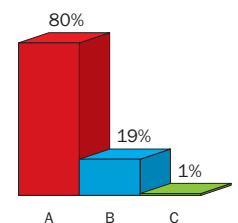
**Jesus film:** none

**Gospel Recordings:** none

**Christian Broadcasting:** none

**ROPAL code:** RBB

## Status of Evangelization



**A** = Have never heard the gospel  
**B** = Have heard the gospel but have not become Christians  
**C** = Are adherents to some form of Christianity