



# People Groups: **THE YAO**

Photo: Ryan Price

**T**he majority of the two million Yao people, who live in Mozambique, Malawi and Tanzania, practise a form of Islam that is intermingled with their traditional animistic beliefs. “Folk Islam” makes them slaves of fear, because they have experienced the power of demonic forces in their communities. Charms are often placed round children’s necks to protect them from evil spirits.

Illnesses are often thought to have been caused by curses or the breaking of social taboos, so government health centres are rarely consulted.

Yao history reveals that their ethno-geographic centre is a small village in the northwestern Mozambican province of

Niassa. When Arabs arrived on the east coast of Africa, they traded guns and clothing with the Yao in exchange for slaves and ivory. Because of this coastal trade, the Yao became one of the richest and most influential tribes in southern Africa.

After World War 1, the entire Yao nation turned to Islam. The great chief Mataka decided that becoming a Christian would have a negative economic impact on his people, while Islam offered them a social system that would assimilate their traditional culture.

Several agencies have shared the gospel with the Yao people and a small percentage of the population is Christian (less than two per cent). In 2014 the complete Bible in *chi Yao*, the language of the Yao people, was published.

## At a Glance

- The Yao are mostly subsistence farmers and maize is their main crop.
- At least 450,000 Yao live in Mozambique. They make up 40% of the population of Lichinga, the capital of Niassa province.
- Close ties with Arabs in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century led to the adoption of Arab religion and architecture. However, they retain their own national identity.
- The Yao in Malawi count among their famous progeny a former President of the Republic, Bakili Muluzi.

## Ask God To:

- Free the Yao from witchcraft, fear and envy.
- Send labourers who will share the gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit.
- Draw indigenous expressions of worship from new believers.
- Bring salvation to chiefs and village leaders who will influence others in the community to turn to Jesus.

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