

The Aiton ethnic group inhabits villages in the Jorhat and Karbi-Aleng districts of Assam State in north-east India. The Indian government does not recognize the Aiton at all, so reliable information about them is scarce. The linguist Anthony Diller in 1990 estimated that there were 'several thousand speakers and semi-speakers' of Aiton.<sup>1</sup>

The ancestors of the Aiton originated in northern Myanmar, where they lived for centuries along with other Tai-speaking groups. 'In the latter part of the eighteenth century, the Aiton entered Assam as political refugees from the Shan State in Burma... . They speak the Aiton language among themselves and Assamese, Hindi and English with others.'<sup>2</sup> The Aiton language



Dwayne Graybill

is part of the Northwest branch of the Southwestern Tai family. It is one of nine different languages that share this affiliation, including Ahom, Khamti, Tai Phake and Khamiyang, all of which are spoken by other ethnic groups in this part of India. Aiton is believed to be similar to the Shan language spoken in Myanmar, China and Thailand, but after more than two centuries of separation from their homeland, the Aiton language, culture and identity have gradually been assimilated.

Elders among the Aiton are responsible for handing the oral traditions, folk tales and songs about their origin and migration down to the next generation. Their songs tell of oppression in their original homeland, which led to their long and difficult journey

across the mountains into India.<sup>3</sup>

Until the past decade all Aiton were farmers, fishermen and hunters, but in recent years an increasing number of people have become businessmen, teachers and labourers in the nearby townships in both the government and private sectors.

Despite their small population, there are 14 different clans among the Aiton. These days the people use their respective clan names as their surnames. The strict marriage customs of the Aiton mean that a

young man must marry his maternal uncle's daughter. A bride price is required, whereby the family of the groom must pay an agreed-upon amount of cash and goods to the family of the bride. In part this is an expression of gratitude to the bride's family for their years of expense in raising her. Buddhist monks are called upon to officiate at the wedding ceremony, which is held at the bride's house. After giving birth an

Aiton woman must not interact with other members of the community for a full month, as she is considered 'polluted'. After the month has passed a ritual is performed and the new mother is free to return to society.

All Aiton are followers of Theravada Buddhism, which they brought with them when they migrated into India more than 200 years ago. They also 'worship Medham Medhphi, their deity, every morning and evening. The *vyas-chow chanq*, the diviner, is called for treatment of the indisposed.'<sup>4</sup> There are no known Christians among the Aiton. They have never appeared on lists of unreached people groups in India, but God has not forgotten them and desires that they may know him as Lord and Saviour.



**Population:**

4,600 (2000)  
5,450 (2010)  
6,300 (2020)

**Countries:** India

**Buddhism:** Theravada

**Christians:** none known

**Overview of the Aiton**

**Other Names:** Aitonia

**Population Sources:** 'several thousand speakers' in India (1990, A Diller)

**Language:** Tai-Kadai, Kam-Tai, Be-Tai, Tai-Sek, Tai, Southwestern, East Central, Northwest

**Dialects:** 0

**Professing Buddhists:** 100%

**Practising Buddhists:** 65%

**Christians:** 0%

**Scripture:** none

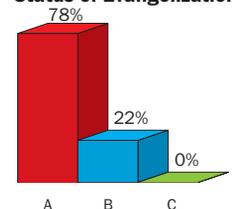
**Jesus film:** none

**Gospel Recordings:** none

**Christian Broadcasting:** none

**ROPAL code:** AIO

**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