

Thavung



Population:

1,110 (2000)

1,250 (2010)

1,450 (2020)

Countries: Thailand, Laos

Buddhism: Theravada

Christians: none known

Overview of the Thavung

Other Names: Thavong, Thaveung, Thavueng, Aheu, So, Phon Soung

Population Sources: 750 in Thailand (1996, M Ferlus)¹

200 to 300 in Laos (1996, M Ferlus)²

Language: Austro-Asiatic, Mon-Khmer, Viet-Muong, Thavung

Dialects: 0

Professing Buddhists: 75%

Practising Buddhists: 40%

Christians: 0%

Scripture: none

Jesus film: none

Gospel Recordings: none

Christian Broadcasting: none

ROPAL code: THM

The tiny Thavung tribe numbers approximately 1,100 people. According to the French linguist Michael Ferlus,³ in 1996 a total of 750 Thavung people inhabited three villages within the Song Daw District of Sakon Nakhon Province in north-east Thailand. Across the border in Laos, Ferlus estimated that between 200 and 300 Thavung live on the banks of the Theun River, east and south of Lak Sao in the Khamkeut District of Khammouan Province and in Borikhamxai Province.

Despite their small size, the Thavung are a fascinating group. Many scholars have tried to trace their history. It seems that they were once part of a larger

group in Laos or eastern Vietnam that splintered as clans or families migrated to different areas. After generations of living separately, they developed linguistic and cultural differences. There seems to be strong evidence that the Thavung are closely related to the Phonsung and Kha Tong Luang tribes in Laos. Together, all three tribes are sometimes called *Aheu*. Most people in Thailand, including even their near neighbours, call them 'So'.⁴

The Thavung of Thailand share their villages with people from the Isan and Tai Yor groups. Although they inhabit the same village, the homes of people from each tribe are separated. During religious festivals and other social gatherings all the inhabitants come together to celebrate.

The Thavung are hard-working agriculturists. Their main cash crop is glutinous rice. They also grow maize, cassava, cotton and

tobacco. To supplement their diets the Thavung hunt 'rats, birds and all kind of game in the forest with arrows, stone slings and flintlocks. . . . They gather mushrooms, wild bananas, coconuts, snails, crabs, frogs, crickets, larvae and cicadas. Wild herbs are used for medical treatment of sickness.'⁵

While the Thavung say they are Buddhists, like numerous other groups in this part of the world their main underlying belief is in spirit-worship. Buddhism is a veneer over a complex array of animistic rituals. Their

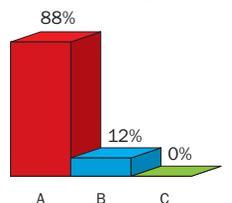


Xavographix

most important guardian spirit is called *pu yao*, who the Thavung believe protects the village. They appear to have borrowed their belief in this spirit from their Tai Yor neighbours. The Tai Yor construct spirit houses in each village to honour the *pu yao*. On special occasions, such as the Chinese New Year, the Thavung join the Tai Yor in sacrificing pigs and rice wine as they pray to their protector at the spirit house.

There are no known Christians among the Thavung people in either Thailand or Laos. Because of their small numbers and close-knit communities, the Thavung village leaders seek to keep out outside influences in a bid to protect their threatened way of life. As a result, the few Thavung who have been exposed to the gospel have had little interest in it. Because the Thavung are not officially recognized in either Thailand or Laos, few people have heard of their existence.

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