

**Population:**

678,900 (2000)

763,000 (2010)

857,000 (2020)

**Countries:** Myanmar, Thailand**Buddhism:** Theravada**Christians:** 12,000**Overview of the Pa-O**

**Other Names:** Taungthu, Karen: Pa-O, Black Karen, Pa-U, Pa'o, Pa Oh, Taungtu, Pao Karen, Pao, Tau-soo

**Population Sources:**

560,000 in Myanmar (2000, B Grimes [1983 figure])

900 in Thailand (2000, J Schliesinger [1995 figure])

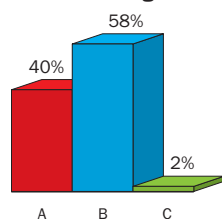
**Language:** Sino-Tibetan, Tibeto-Burman, Karen, Pa'o

**Dialects:** 2 (Southern Pa-O [Myanmar], Northern Pa-O [Thailand])

**Professing Buddhists:** 80%**Practising Buddhists:** 60%**Christians:** 1.7%**Scripture:** Portions 1912**Jesus film:** available

**Gospel Recordings:** Taungthu; Pa-O; Karen: Black

**Christian Broadcasting:** available

**ROPAL code:** BLK**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

Approximately 700,000 Pa-O people live in Southeast Asia. The large majority inhabits the south-western part of Shan State in Myanmar. The geographical centre of the Pa-O could be considered the mountains around the towns of Taunggyi and Kalaw.<sup>1</sup> A smaller number of Pa-O live in Mon State, Karen State and as far south as the Tanintharyi (formerly Tenasserim) Division on the Gulf of Martahan in the southern tip of Myanmar.

An additional 900 Pa-O live inside Thailand, inhabiting four villages within the Muang District of Mae Hong Son Province.<sup>2</sup> The Pa-O in Thailand fled Myanmar in 1975 because of the terrible social upheavals and human rights abuses committed by the military junta.

The Pa-O are called *Taungthu* by the Burmese, which means 'hill people'. The British colonialists called them *Black Karen* because most Pa-O women wear black or dark blue dresses. The Pa-O language shows them to be part of the great collection of Karen groups in Myanmar and Thailand, which together number as many as five

million people in 20 language groups. Many Pa-O do not even know of this connection to the Karen, however, and consider themselves a unique people group.<sup>3</sup>

The Pa-O believe that their ancestors 'fled north to Shan State from the Mon City of Thaton, in Lower Burma, after the overthrow of the Mon King Manuha in the eleventh century by King Anawrahta of Pagan'.<sup>4</sup> This defeat took place in 1057. Today the Pa-O are the second most numerous ethnic

group in Shan State after the Shan.

One key area in which the Pa-O differ from other Karen groups is in their religious beliefs. While most of the Karen are either animists or Christians, the Pa-O have been a strong Buddhist group for many centuries. Buddhism has influenced all Karen groups to some degree, but Buddhism dominates every area of the lives and communities of the Pa-O. In Myanmar, most Pa-O villages can be identified by the magnificent wooden temples that are constructed on the outskirts of their villages.

Although one estimate puts the number of Pa-O Christians at around 12,000 (1.7%),<sup>5</sup> most Pa-O Buddhists have steadfastly rejected all efforts to evangelize them. One

source states, 'The Pa-O people are Buddhists. They consider ordination as a novice even greater merit than ordination as a monk. During the first day of the novice ordination ceremony, called *poi sang long*, the sounds of drums, gongs and cymbals echo between the mountain ridges, when boys with shaved heads are



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taken from their homes to the temple. . . . However, they still retain animist beliefs to some extent, but much less than the Pwo and Sgaw Karen. They worship spirits, such as the house and tree spirits and spirit shrines are located outside villages or near pagodas, where offerings can be made.<sup>6</sup> Missionaries first translated Scripture portions into Pa-O in 1912, and the *Jesus* film is now available in their language.