

The Isan are the eighth largest Buddhist people group in the world, with a population exceeding 22 million. The overwhelming majority live throughout the provinces of north-east Thailand—a region known as Isan. A further 8,000 spill across the Mekong River into adjacent parts of Laos, while Isan migrant workers can also be found in Singapore, Malaysia and numerous Western nations.

It is difficult to classify and count the Isan, as their language is basically identical to Lao, and their culture and customs are also very similar. The subtle differences that distinguish the Lao from the Isan people are mostly social and historical.¹ The Isan are known as the Lao Isan or Tai Isan, while the most common designation used by the people themselves is *Khon Isan*, simply meaning 'Isan people'. Isan is a Sanskrit word. They 'are named after Phra Isuan, also called Phra Siwa or Shiva, the Hindu god of Destruction'.²

In Thailand the Isan are found in at least 17 different provinces, concentrated in the north-east. At least one million Isan live in Bangkok City, where they add their own colour, exotic food and culture to the mix of humanity in the sprawling metropolis. The 7,000 Isan on the Lao side of the border have made their homes in Vientiane City and neighbouring parts of Borikhamxai Province, and in areas of Champasak Province in southern Laos. Thousands of Isan have migrated overseas either as migrant workers or as refugees.

Despite pressure from the Thai government to make Central Thai the standard national language, 88 per cent

of Isan people in Thailand continue to speak Isan at home, 1 per cent speak Central Thai exclusively, and 11 per cent use both.³

Almost all Isan claim to be Theravada Buddhists but, as one source states, the average Isan person is 'likely to be staunch Buddhist but he is unlikely to have any real understanding of Buddhist doctrine or to be concerned with the long and difficult task of subduing desire and

craving. He sees his religion in a much simpler, pragmatic light. He will keep the Five Precepts—don't kill, steal, lie, drink alcohol, or commit adultery (almost certainly unsuccessfully)—and will believe that he should be tolerant, kindly, and generous to others. These attitudes will enable him to acquire a good balance of merit, leading he expects, to a better life.⁴

Although there are now several hundred

small churches among the Isan, Jesus Christ remains a little-known figure among this group. Culturally sensitive Christian radio ministry has proven effective in recent years, but follow-up is difficult because of the meagre human resources available and the vast, widespread area that the Isan inhabit. Just two out of every one thousand Isan people profess faith in Christ, although in recent years some small encouraging signs of growth have appeared, giving hope that this large, precious people group will soon have larger numbers of Christians among them.



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Population:
 21,854,800 (2000)
 23,888,700 (2010)
 26,112,000 (2020)
Countries: Thailand, Laos, Singapore, Malaysia, USA, Canada, United Kingdom, Australia, and many other nations
Buddhism: Theravada
Christians: 50,000

Overview of the Isan

Other Names: Tai Isan, Thai Isan, Lao Isan, Isaan, Northeastern Thai
Population Sources: 20,876,200 in Thailand (1995 census)⁵
 7,000 in Laos (1995, Asian Minorities Outreach)
 also in Singapore, Malaysia, USA, Canada, United Kingdom, Australia, and many other nations of the world
Language: Tai-Kadai, Kam-Tai, Be-Tai, Tai-Sek, Tai, Southwestern, East Central, Lao-Phutai

Dialects: 3 (North Isan, Central Isan, Southern Isan)
Professing Buddhists: 95%
Practising Buddhists: 80%
Christians: 0.2%
Scripture: Bible 1932; new translation in progress
Jesus film: available (Lao)
Gospel Recordings: Lao, Northern Lao
Christian Broadcasting: available
ROPAL code: TTS

Status of Evangelization

