

More than 8,000 Eastern Lawa people inhabit villages in northern Thailand, on the border between Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai provinces. The Eastern Lawa are most concentrated in the village of Wiang Papao. Smaller numbers inhabit parts of Mae Hong Son, Lamphun, Lampang, Uthai Thani, Suphan Buri and Kanchanaburi provinces.

The Eastern Lawa language is not intelligible with Western Lawa. Speakers of each language in Thailand can understand some words, but generally they revert to the lingua franca of Northern Thai in order to communicate.

A script was invented for the Eastern Lawa, but few have learned how to read it and today less than 1 per cent of the people are literate in their own language.<sup>1</sup> Between one quarter and one half of Eastern Lawa are able to read Thai.

Despite their present small numbers, written records show that the long history of the

Lawa dates back at least as far as the Tai kingdom of Kengtung (in today's north-east Myanmar) at the end of the 13th century. Documents from the time record how King Mengrai 'sent troops to expel the Lawa, a tribal group that was formerly very influential in the area. Many Lawa people were exiled to live on mountains outside the city, while others became servants of the royal families at the court of Chiang Mai.'<sup>2</sup>

Like many tribal peoples in Southeast Asia, the Eastern Lawa profess to be Buddhists, but a deeper examination reveals their dependence on animistic practices and spirit appeasement.<sup>3</sup> One source says,

'The Lawa worship a vast array of spirits. They are believed to be in contact with a much greater variety of spirits than many other tribal groups of northern Thailand. . . . Those Lawa living in remote villages still honor all good spirits, who watch over their families, the sky, the jungle, the mountains and the entrance to their village. They sacrifice pigs, chickens, rice wine and, when available, even buffaloes in order to propitiate the spirits. . . . Since most of the Lawa have already been converted to Buddhism, only a few Lawa villages still

hold such extensive and costly sacrificial rituals.'<sup>4</sup>

The Eastern Lawa also worship their ancestors. Most villages have their own shamans and exorcists to meditate between the people and the spirit realm. Many Lawa wear lucky charms around their necks or waists in a bid to ward off evil spirits.<sup>5</sup>

Both foreign

and tribal missionaries have visited the Eastern Lawa with the gospel, but they generally receive a lukewarm reception. The Eastern Lawa community is largely closed to outside influence, and the village leaders have tight control over the people. Change is frowned upon, especially religious change, which many Eastern Lawa fear will bring disgrace on their ancestors and invite retribution on their communities from a host of evil spirits. Despite these pressures, a small number of Eastern Lawa families have embraced the gospel. Some have been forced to leave their village and live elsewhere.



**Population:**

7,850 (2000)  
8,600 (2010)  
9,400 (2020)

**Countries:** Thailand

**Buddhism:** Theravada

**Christians:** 100



Paul Hattaway

## Overview of the Eastern Lawa

**Other Names:** Lawa, Northern Lawa, Wiang Papao Lua, L'wa, Lowa, Lavu'a, Lava, Milakkha

**Population Source:** 7,000 in Thailand (1987, D Schlatter)

**Language:** Austro-Asiatic, Mon-Khmer, Northern Mon-Khmer, Palaungic-Khmuic, Palaungic, Western Palaungic, Waic, Lawa

**Dialects:** 2 (Phalo, Phang)

**Professing Buddhists:** 85%

**Practising Buddhists:** 45%

**Christians:** 1.2%

**Scripture:** none

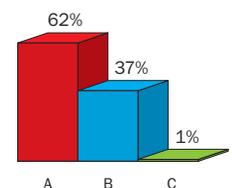
**Jesus film:** none

**Gospel Recordings:** Lawa; Lawa: Ban Dong; Lawa: Ban Sam; Lawa: Chang Maw; Lawa: Eastern; Lawa: Eastern Papae

**Christian Broadcasting:** none

**ROPAL code:** LWL

## 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