

Nyaw

Approximately 120,000 people belonging to the Nyaw ethnic group live in north-east Thailand and central Laos. More than 80,000 Nyaw are found in the Thai provinces of Sakhon Nakhon,¹ Nakhon Phanom,² Mukdahan³ and Nong Khai.⁴ All of these locations are near the Thai-Lao border, which is marked by the great Mekong River. In Thailand the Nyaw share their communities with Isan, So and Thavung people. They all seem to get along well, even though the So and Thavung speak completely unrelated Mon-Khmer languages.

One source states that about 30,000 Nyaw also live in Laos.⁵ They inhabit the Pakkading, Pakxan and Borikhan districts of Borikhamxai Province, and the Hinboun District of Khammouan Province.⁶

The common belief among the Nyaw people in Thailand is that their ancestors migrated from a place along the Laos-Vietnam

border area. Others claim that the Nyaw came from the Xishuangbanna (Sipsongpanna) area of south-west China, although no people groups in China today identify themselves by this name.

Although the historical origins of the Nyaw are shrouded in mystery, linguistic studies reveal that the Nyaw language is closely related to Isan and the variety of Lao spoken in Luang Prabang, the largest city in Laos.⁷ One researcher has given a more detailed analysis: 'Although the Nyaw have specific characteristics of Northern Tai in their language, they speak quite varying dialects in their different locations.'⁸ Nyaw people living in 26 different villages in northern Thailand were studied. 'From the

phonetic point of view, the Nyaw tones in these villages differ so distinctively from each other that they produce 26 accents. These accents could be divided into three major dialects based on tonal systems, namely four-tone, five-tone and six-tone systems.'⁹

A Nyaw marriage is customarily arranged by a go-between who negotiates with the

families of the bride and groom over the size of the bride price. These days the price may be as high as 60,000 *baht* (about \$1,500). One source states that a large number of young Nyaw women have become prostitutes in Bangkok and Pattaya.¹⁰ After the death of parents, the family house is left to the child (usually the youngest daughter) who had taken care of the parents in their old age.

Almost all Nyaw in Thailand consider themselves Theravada Buddhists, while in Communist Laos the strength of their adherence to

Buddhism is not so strong. They believe in a variety of spirits and supernatural beings. The most feared is *pu jao*, the spirit of the village. Once a year, the Nyaw sacrifice pigs and chickens to this protector spirit.

There are a few scattered Nyaw Christians in both Thailand and Laos, although in both countries they live in areas with few known churches. Most Nyaw people have no access to the gospel, even though those in Thailand live in a country with freedom of religion.

No Bible or audio recordings exist in the Nyaw language, but work is underway in Thailand to produce the first Nyaw Scriptures.¹¹



Paul Hattaway



Population:
118,560 (2000)
136,000 (2010)
156,700 (2020)
Countries: Thailand, Laos
Buddhism: Theravada
Christians: 100

Overview of the Nyaw

Other Names: Tai Yor, Yor, Nyo, Tai Nyo, Ngeou, Jo, Yo, Au, Ou, Ngo, Tai No

Population Sources: 80,000 in Thailand (2001, J Schliesinger [1999 figure])¹²

30,000 in Laos (2001, J Schliesinger [1990 figure])¹³

Language: Tai-Kadai, Kam-Tai, Be-Tai, Tai-Sek, Tai, Southwestern, East Central, Lao-Phutai

Dialects: 3

Professing Buddhists: 95%

Practising Buddhists: 40%

Christians: 0.1%

Scripture: none; work in progress

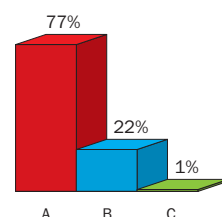
Jesus film: none

Gospel Recordings: none

Christian Broadcasting: none

ROPAL code: NYW

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