

Phuan



Population:

310,300 (2000)
357,600 (2010)
414,000 (2020)

Countries: Thailand, Laos

Buddhism: Theravada

Christians: 800

Overview of the Phuan

Other Names: Lao Phuan, Phu Un, Phouan, Puan, Phoan, Poan, Phuon, Phu-uen

Population Sources:

200,000 in Thailand (2001, J Schliesinger [1999 figure])

96,000 in Laos (1995, L Chazee)

Language: Tai-Kadai, Kam-Tai, Be-Tai, Tai-Sek, Tai, Southwestern, East Central, Chiang Saeng

Dialects: 0

Professing Buddhists: 95%

Practising Buddhists: 90%

Christians: 0.2%

Scripture: none

Jesus film: none

Gospel Recordings: none

Christian Broadcasting: none

ROPAL code: PHU

More than 300,000 members of the Phuan ethnic group live in Thailand and Laos in Southeast Asia. The majority—more than 200,000—live in at least ten provinces of central and north-east Thailand, especially in Udon Thani, Lopburi and Sukkothai provinces.¹ French researcher Laurent Chazee estimated a further 96,000 Phuan people living in Laos in 1995.² In Laos they inhabit six different provinces and regions in the central and northern parts of the country.³ The main location of the Phuan is near the Plain of Jars in Xiengkhoang Province. The Plain of Jars is an ancient collection of

huge stone jars, believed to be around 2,000 years old. No one is sure why they were made or what they were used for. Most of the huge jars weigh between 600 kilograms and one ton (1,300 to 2,200 lb.). The largest weighs six tons (13,200 lb.).

The Phuan in Thailand were taken as captives of war and forcibly removed to Thailand at various times between 1792 and 1890 after the collapse of the

Lan Xang ('Million Elephants') kingdom in Laos. They were ordered to render manual labour for noble Siamese families.

Today the Phuan are one of the proudest and most socially prominent of the 'tribal Tai' groups. Their language, which is closely related to Northern Tai, Tai Dam and Song, is spoken in almost all Phuan homes. In the past the Phuan used their own script, but it has become obsolete. The Phuan are proud of their ethnicity and not intimidated

by larger groups such as the Thai or Lao.⁴ One researcher has found that the Phuan are 'proud of their physical appearance. Both sexes have fairer skin, are taller, have longer noses and more oval faces than the members of other Tai kin groups.'⁵

Buddhism is not only the religion of almost all Phuan people; it is the centre of their social existence. Every Phuan village in Thailand and most villages in Laos have their own temples. 'Many of the older Phuan women visit the temple on a daily basis during lunch and dinner times. They carry food in their baskets to the temple

hall where they meet with other elderly Phuan women to enjoy themselves, eating and chatting.'⁶

The Phuan also live in bondage and fear of a complex hierarchy of evil spirits. The most important is *tha phu ban*, the protective spirit of the village. The Phuan make offerings of fruit, rice whiskey and other delicacies to the spirit which, if placated, is believed to grant favours to the people. If a favour is given, the Phuan sacrifice a

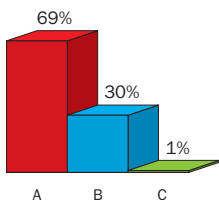
chicken or a pig in honour of the spirit.

There is a small yet significant number of Christians among the Phuan both in Thailand and Laos. One tourist book on Laos suggests that there are a considerable number of Phuan Christians near Oakxan in Borikhamxai Province: 'The local population is predominantly Phuan, a tribal Thai group; many are Christian, which makes them doubly suspicious in the eyes of the Lao authorities.'⁷



Paul Hattaway

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