

Tai Gapong

More than 3,200 Tai Gapong people live in Southeast Asia. At least 2,000 inhabit a single village in Thailand—Ban Varit in Waritchaphum District of Sakhon Nakhon Province. There are about 500 homes in Ban Varit, most of which are inhabited by Tai Gapong families, along with some ethnic Phutai and Yoy people.



The Tai Gapong say that they originated in Borikhamxai Province, Laos, in a district known as Gapong, from which they took their name. No district or town called Gapong exists in Laos today, but the 1,200 Tai Gapong in Laos today inhabit Ban Nahuong, about 25 kilometres (15 mi.) south of the town of Ban Nape in eastern Borikhamxai Province, near the Lao border with Vietnam.

According to Joachim Schliesinger, ‘the ancestors of the Tai Gapong in Thailand migrated westwards from . . . central Laos, crossed the Mekong and settled in their present location in 1844 or 1845. The reason for their migration is unclear; they may have been taken as war captives and resettled across the Mekong River by the Siamese army, or migrated voluntarily.’¹

In their language, *Gapong* means ‘brain’—therefore the autonym of this interesting group means ‘Brainy Tai’. Other Tai groups call them Phutai, but although the Tai Gapong say they are distantly related to the Phutai, they are now a distinct tribe with their own customs, history and dialect. In fact, even the Phutai who live in the Tai Gapong village in Thailand consider

them different.

For generations, Tai Gapong women have worn an elaborate traditional dress that sets them apart from other tribes. It consists of a short skirt that falls just below the knees, ‘with white, red, brown and yellow horizontal stripes at its lower part, a

long-sleeved dark coloured vest buttoned in the middle with silver coins and decorated with red bands along the hem, collar and sleeve-ends.

In the past, Tai Gapong women wore a silver belt, silver earrings, silver necklaces and silver anklets.²

All Tai Gapong people in Thailand are Buddhists, while among those in Laos the situation is not so clear. Although many Tai Gapong families in Laos claim to be Buddhists, their ceremonies and rituals are dominated by animistic practices.

Even in Thailand the Tai Gapong reportedly ‘believe in an array of spirits, such as the spirit of the village, the spirit of the house, the spirit of the water, the spirit of the tree, but their most important spiritual being is *chao pu mahaesak*, an angel-like being, humanized in the form of a man-like statue in his shrine. The Tai Gapong honour *chao pu mahaesak* annually on a specific day with flowers, whisky, rice and other small sacrifices.’³

Because few people are even aware of the existence of the Tai Gapong people, little or no Christian outreach has ever been conducted among them. Only a very few Tai Gapong have heard the gospel. They continue—as they have for centuries—to live their lives without the slightest knowledge of Jesus Christ or his salvation.



Population:
3,200 (2000)
3,690 (2010)
4,300 (2020)
Countries: Thailand, Laos
Buddhism: Theravada
Christians: none known

Overview of the Tai Gapong

Other Names: Tai Kapon, Tai Kapong, Tai Capong, Phu Tai Gapong

Population Sources: 2,000 in Thailand (2001, J Schliesinger [1999 figure])

1,200 in Laos (2001, J Schliesinger)

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

Dialects: 0

Professing Buddhists: 75%

Practising Buddhists: 45%

Christians: 0%

Scripture: none

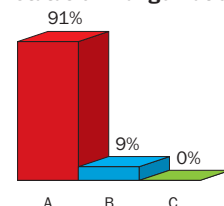
Jesus film: none

Gospel Recordings: none

Christian Broadcasting: none

ROPAL code: none

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