

# Tak Bai Thai

More than 24,000 people living at the border of southern Thailand and northern Malaysia belong to the unique yet little-known Tak Bai Thai people group. In Thailand, approximately 20,000 Tak Bai Thai inhabit the three provinces nearest the Thai-Malay border: Narathiwat,<sup>1</sup> Pattani<sup>2</sup> and Yala. The geographical centre of the Tak Bai Thai people is the district that bears their name, Tak Bai, in Narathiwat Province. Tak Bai is just a mile or two from the Malaysian border.

Additional communities of Tak Bai Thai people are in Peninsula Malaysia.<sup>3</sup> 'When Kelantan came under British colonial rule in 1909, and the borders of Malaysia were fixed, the Tak Bai Thai were thus suddenly divided. Several thousand Tak Bai Thai live still across the border in Kelantan state of Malaysia who have family members in and around Tak Bai District in Thailand.'<sup>4</sup>

The Buddhist Tak Bai Thai live alongside Southern Thai and Pattani Muslims. The groups are tolerant of each other, though they keep their distance and have little close contact. Conflicts sometimes arise over land use. The Tak Bai Thai own almost all the land in the areas where they live, while the Muslims have almost none. This has led to tensions as the Muslims sometimes encroach illegally onto the Tak Bai Thai land, building houses and huts without permission.

Most ethnographic research on Thailand lists the Tak Bai Thai as part of the Southern Thai language group, but their vernacular is very different.<sup>5</sup> It has been described as 'a rather distinct and ancient Tai dialect, which developed differently from most of the

modern Tai dialects spoken in Thailand today. Tak Bai Thai is very different from the Southern Thai language; it is more a mixture of northern and central Thai dialects, but articulated in the fast manner as the Southern Thai usually speak. Some words are exactly the same as the Thai speak in the Sukkothai area [in north-central Thailand].'<sup>6</sup>

In fact, linguist Marvin Brown has found that the Tak Bai Thai language is similar to that spoken by people in Sukkothai in AD 1250.<sup>7</sup> It is not beyond the realm of possibility, therefore, that the Tak Bai Thai people along today's Thailand-Malaysia border are the descendants resulting from an interesting historical incident. Joachim Schliesinger says that 'when King Ramkhamhaeng of Sukkothai extended the power of his kingdom deep into the Malay peninsula in the late thirteenth century, he resettled thousands of Thai people from the Sukkothai region to the south, most probably to strengthen his foothold in this far corner of the kingdom. . . . They brought with them Buddhism and built many Buddhist temples in and around Pron, establishing Buddhism in the southern areas of the Malay peninsulas before Islam was introduced.'<sup>8</sup>

More than 700 years after they arrived in the area, the Tak Bai Thai people are still zealous Buddhists. Having to fight off

the advances of Islam has made them even stronger in their faith and even more resistant to change. Few have ever heard of Jesus Christ, and a mere handful have put their trust in him.



## Population:

24,000 (2000)  
26,600 (2010)  
29,700 (2020)

**Countries:** Thailand, Malaysia

**Buddhism:** Theravada

**Christians:** 20

## Overview of the Tak Bai Thai

**Other Names:** Pak Tai, Pak Thai, Paktay, Takbai Thai, Thai Tak Bai

**Population Sources:** 20,000 in Thailand (2001, J Schliesinger [2000 figure])

'several thousand' in Malaysia (2001, J Schliesinger)

**Language:** Tai-Kadai, Kam-Tai, Be-Tai, Tai-Sek, Tai, Southwestern, Southern

**Dialects:** 0

**Professing Buddhists:** 99%

**Practising Buddhists:** 80%

**Christians:** 0.1%

**Scripture:** none

**Jesus film:** none

**Gospel Recordings:** none

**Christian Broadcasting:** none

**ROPAL code:** SOU01

## Status of Evangelization

