

More than 100,000 Tavoyan people inhabit a long coastal stretch of the Tanintharyi Division (known as Tenasserim prior to 1989) in southern Myanmar.¹ There are five major ethnic groups present in the Tanintharyi Division, which runs parallel with Thailand in the thin tract of land that separates the Andaman Sea from the Gulf of Thailand. The Tavoyan inhabit the northern part of the state, centred around their ancient homeland of Dawei City.

A small number of Tavoyan people have made their way across the border and now live in refugee camps inside Thailand. They fled to Thailand to escape oppression at the hands of the Burmese authorities.

In the mid-1990s, more than 15,000 local civilians were forced to work on the construction of the Ye to Dawei railway. The inhumane conditions resulted in hundreds of deaths. The railway was not constructed for tourism or trade, but to help the Burmese military rapidly deploy troops to the troubled border areas.

Many young Tavoyan men in Dawei have been forced to attend Burmese military training to counter insurgency groups. Today there are at least 22 rebel armies operating against the Burmese in Myanmar.

One of the least known of these is the small Tavoyan army in the Tanintharyi Division. For centuries the Tavoyan people have been peace loving and gentle people, but their patience has been pushed to the limit by the evil activities and abuses of the Burmese junta. Even after arriving in Thailand, one group of refugees was reportedly attacked by a battalion of Myanmar's 62nd Infantry.²

The 1931 Burmese census returned a figure of 156,507 Tavoyan people³—higher than today's estimate. It is difficult to

identify the Tavoyans today because of their close ethnic and linguistic affinity to the Burmese majority. It is not easy to judge where one group stops and the other begins. One book says, 'Most of the people living in the [Tanintharyi] Division are of Burmese ethnicity, although splitting hairs one can easily identify Tavoyan and Myeik sub-groups of the Burmese who enjoy their own dialect, cuisine and so on.'⁴

The Tavoyan people qualify for inclusion in this book because, in addition to cultural differences, their dialect is different enough from standard Burmese to make communication difficult. The *Ethnologue* states that Tavoyan is 'one of the better known

varieties of nonstandard Burmese with profound pronunciation and vocabulary differences from Burmese'.⁵

The main Tavoyan town of Dawei (formerly known as Tavoy) has been inhabited for at least 500 years. As early as 1586, the town was one of the

main producers of tin in Asia, supplying all of India. In the mid-1700s the town became the possession of the Ayutthaya rulers in today's Thailand, who used it as a trade port.

The American Baptists worked in the Tavoyan area for many decades, but most of their converts were from among the Karen people. They found the Buddhist Tavoyans slow to respond to the gospel—a pattern that continues to this day. Only about one in every thousand Tavoyan people today are Christians.



Population:
100,500 (2000)
112,900 (2010)
126,900 (2020)
Countries: Myanmar, refugees in Thailand
Buddhism: Theravada
Christians: 100



Myanmar Faces and Places

Overview of the Tavoyan

Other Names: Tavoy, Dawei, Tavoya

Population Sources: 100,000 in Myanmar (2002, Myanmar Faces and Places)

500 in Thailand (2003, P Hattaway)

Language: Sino-Tibetan, Tibeto-Burman, Lolo-Burmese, Burmish, Southern

Dialects: 0

Professing Buddhists: 98%

Practising Buddhists: 85%

Christians: 0.1%

Scripture: none

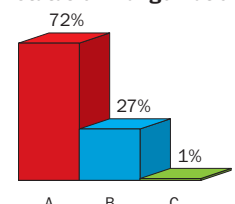
Jesus film: none

Gospel Recordings: none

Christian Broadcasting: none

ROPAL code: TVN

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