

More than five million speakers of the Southern Thai language live in a total of 14 provinces in the arm of south Thailand that reaches down to Malaysia. There are many thousands of people of Southern Thai origin living in the USA, England and other Western nations around the world, but because they identify themselves simply as 'Thai' in those places, it is difficult to estimate the number of Southern Thai living overseas.

The main areas of Southern Thai inhabitation are the provinces of Chumphon, Nakhon Sri Thammarat, Phatthalung, Ranong, Phang Nga,

Phuket, Krabi, Trang, Surat Thani, Pattani and the four provinces bordering Malaysia: Narathiwat, Satun, Songkhla and Narathiwat. The region—squeezed between the idyllic Andaman Sea and the Gulf of Thailand—includes famous tourist spots like Phuket and Krabi, which are visited by millions of tourists every year.

The differences between the Southern Thai and other Thai are principally linguistic.¹ The Southern Thai language is called Dambro, which has been described as 'a group of dialects more distantly related to other Thai languages. The border dialects are quite distinct from others. Eighty-one per cent use Southern Thai in the home, 8.5 per cent use Central Thai, 10.5 per cent use both.'²

Many historians believe that the region now inhabited by the Southern Thai was once filled with Malay people. The Thais came down from southern China about 1,000 years ago, driving most of the Malays southward. 'They intermixed with . . . the Mon and Khmer . . . and with the Malay and Negroes who also inhabited the area.

Because of their mixed origin, many Southern Thai still differ somewhat in appearance from their Central Thai neighbors to the north, being of a darker hue.'³

Interestingly, about 1.5 million of the Southern Thai are Sunni Muslims. The strong Islamic influences come from Malaysia, and also from the 1.5 million Pattani Malays, who live alongside the Southern Thais yet are ethnolinguistically distinct from them.⁴



International Mission Board

Both Buddhism and Islam appear to have arrived in Southern Thailand at about the same time during the 13th century. Nakhon Sri Thammarat became a 'center for the diffusion of a new school of Theravada Buddhism based on teachings from Ceylon [Sri Lanka]. From Nakhon Sri Thammarat monks carried the new form of Buddhism to the Angkorian Empire [Cambodia], Sukkothai [Central Thailand], and Lanna [Northern Thailand].'⁵

With such a religious battle for the hearts of the Southern Thai between Islam and Buddhism, it is not surprising that Christianity has failed to make much of an impact among this large unreached people group. 'Although several mission agencies are laboring among the Southern Thai, response has been low. Less than 1 per cent of the Southern Thai are Christians and the majority have never heard a clear presentation of the gospel. The Bible and the Jesus film have not been translated into the Dambro language and no Christian broadcasts are available to the Southern Thai.'⁶



Population:

5,465,000 (2000)
5,973,200 (2010)
6,528,700 (2020)

Countries: Thailand, Malaysia, USA, United Kingdom, Australia

Buddhism: Theravada

Christians: 27,000

Overview of the Southern Thai

Other Names: Dambro, Southern Thai, Thai Malay

Population Sources:

5,000,000 in Thailand (1990, A Diller)

also in Malaysia, USA, United Kingdom, Australia

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

Dialects: 1 (Thai Malay)

Professing Buddhists: 70%

Practising Buddhists: 45%

Christians: 0.5%

Scripture: none

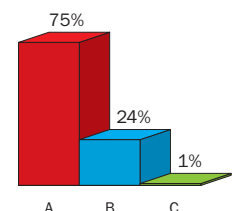
Jesus film: none

Gospel Recordings: Thai: Southern

Christian Broadcasting: none

ROPAL code: SOU

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