

**Population:**

3,077,100 (2000)  
3,823,000 (2010)  
4,767,500 (2020)

**Countries:** Laos, USA, Cambodia, France, Myanmar, Thailand, Canada, Vietnam, Argentina, Australia, United Kingdom and many other nations

**Buddhism:** Theravada

**Christians:** 50,000

**Overview of the Lao**

**Other Names:** Laotian, Laotian Tai, Phou Lao, Eastern Thai, Lum Lao, Lao Wiang, Lao Kao, Rong Kong, Tai Lao, Lao-Tai, Lao-Lum, Lao-Noi

**Population Sources:**

2,403,891 in Laos (1995 census)<sup>1</sup>  
171,577 in USA (1990 census)  
55,000 in Cambodia (2003, Joshua Pr II)  
49,600 in France (2003, Joshua Project II)  
21,000 in Myanmar (2003, Joshua Pr II)  
20,000 in Thailand (2001, J Schliesinger [2000 figure])<sup>2</sup>  
12,000 in Canada (2003, Joshua Project II)<sup>3</sup>

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

**Dialects:** 6 (Luang Prabang, Vientiane, Savannakhet, Pakse, Lao-Kao, Lao-Khrang)

**Professing Buddhists:** 93%

**Practising Buddhists:** 80%

**Christians:** 1.6%

**Scripture:** Bible 1936; New Testament 1926; Portions 1906

**Jesus film:** available

**Gospel Recordings:** Lao; Lao Phakistan; Lum Lao; Northern Lao

**Christian Broadcasting:** available

**ROPAL code:** NOL

Approximately three and a half million Lao people lend their name to Laos, one of Asia's most unreached countries. The 1995 Laos census recorded 2.4 million Lao people in their homeland. An additional 200,000 have now made their home in the United States, with many arriving in the late-1970s as refugees after the Vietnam War. Significant populations of Lao people can also be found in Cambodia (especially the northern provinces), France, Myanmar, Thailand and in numerous other Western nations.

The ancestors of the Lao people are believed to have migrated southward from China approximately one thousand years ago. As they made their way into today's Laos, they found the land already inhabited by the Khmu. They drove the Khmu into the mountains and took the best land for themselves.<sup>4</sup>

Today the Lao are renowned for being a gentle, friendly and peace-loving people. Their communities revolve around close-knit family ties. It could be said the Lao love their families so much that they choose to have large ones! It is not uncommon to find families with ten or more children in Laos, which has one of the highest birth rates of any country in the world.

Although the overwhelming majority of Lao people consider themselves Theravada Buddhists, their faith is 'interwoven with beliefs in various deities and local spirits. The latter, called *phi*, are ever-present in Lao religious beliefs; they reside in villages, houses, gardens, trees, water, crops and ancestors. They have to be placated by offerings of food placed

in small shrines and occasionally with sacrifices, such as chickens and pigs.<sup>5</sup>

Catholic missionaries first entered Laos in the 17th century, but the Protestant presence never took hold until the late 1800s. Daniel McGilvary and his team travelled north into Laos from their base in the northern Thailand town of Chiang Mai, gaining 3,000 Lao converts over the years.<sup>6</sup>

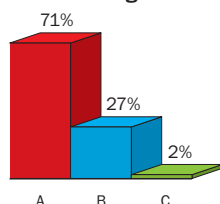
In recent years, the church in Laos has grown more than it did throughout all of the previous century. The Communist authorities have responded

with sporadic persecution and oppression of the church. Pastors are imprisoned and restrictions are placed on the house churches. Today there are an estimated 40,000 Christians among the Lao in Laos (15,000 Catholics and 25,000 Protestants), in addition to at least another 10,000 Christians among the diaspora Lao scattered around the world.



Paul Hattaway

Despite these impressive gains, the total percentage of Christians is still less than two out of every hundred Lao people. Most Lao have yet to hear the gospel for the first time. The biggest obstacles to the evangelization of Laos are the anti-Christian government and the relaxed, care-about-nothing attitude of many Lao. A missionary once asked a Lao boy what his idea of heaven was. He replied, 'It is like this. A large shade tree that casts a cool shadow under which I can lie and have someone fan me, and bring me water and wait on me generally.' Then he added after a moment's thought, 'And you know, I must have nothing whatever to do.'<sup>7</sup>

**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