

Approximately 150,000 So people live on both sides of the Laos-Thailand border in Southeast Asia. More than 110,000 live in western Laos, especially in northern Savannakhet Province and the southern half of Khammouan Province. An additional 30,000 So people inhabit 53 villages in north-east Thailand.¹ They are the descendants of prisoners of war who were brought to Thailand after the Siamese sacked Vientiane in 1827.² Since their arrival in

Thailand, the So 'have struggled to avoid the Thai government's policy of gentle assimilation. The So feel the education policies of Thailand are especially designed to assimilate them to Thai society and culture.'³

There may also be So communities in Vietnam, but this is difficult to determine due to the confusing

ethnolinguistic makeup of the So people. It seems that there are several sub-groups among this group, with their dialects overlapping with those of other related peoples. In Laos the So are usually called 'Mangkong', while some linguists call the So language 'Western Bru'. The Mangkong are also located in Vietnam, where they are part of the official Bru-Van Kieu minority group.⁴ The So in Thailand are more Buddhist than their counterparts in Laos, where the majority are spirit-worshippers with less Buddhist influence. Overall only about half of the So people in Asia claim to be Buddhists, and the number who actively practise Buddhism is significantly less. Relatively few attend temples or enroll their sons as monks. One source says, 'The So people are nominally Buddhists and they are very spirit

conscious, fearing most the deadly *phi pop*. In former days, individuals believed to be possessed by this evil spirit were ruthlessly killed by the village community.'⁵

There are approximately 2,000 Christians among the So in Laos, primarily in Khammouan Province. Overseas Missionary Fellowship and the Swiss Brethren had missionaries working among them in the 1950s and 1960s. 'They saw whole villages

accept Christ, mostly the result of people being delivered from demonic oppression and the supernatural healing of sickness. By the time all foreign missionaries were expelled from Laos in 1975, they had left behind a strong and evangelizing So church. They have endured great persecution and hardship from the Communist authorities in recent years, but most have

stood firm in their Christian faith.'⁶

In Thailand several missionaries have attempted to reach the So, including Bob and Eileen West of New Tribes Mission, who translated Scripture portions into the So language in 1980. 'They have spent fifteen years in Thai So villages, translating Bible portions and evangelistic books into their dialects. . . . Although they often show an intense interest in Scripture, the So have not yet overcome the spiritual barriers that prevent them from knowing the King of Kings. Their families and relatives all fear that if any one of them abandons worship of the spirits, the entire family will be punished. Consequently, only a few have accepted Christ to date, barely enough in any one place to form a church.'⁷



Paul Hattaway



Population:

135,400 (2000)
165,800 (2010)
203,400 (2020)

Countries: Laos, Thailand, Vietnam

Buddhism: Theravada

Christians: 3,000

Overview of the So

Other Names: Kha So, Kah So, Thro, Mangkong, Mang-koong, Makong, So Makon, Mankoong, Mang Cong, Sou, Tro, Leun, Leung, Leu, Muong Leung, Luun, Ruul

Population Sources:

92,321 in Laos (1995 census)⁸
30,000 in Thailand (2000, J Schliesinger [1995 figure])⁹
also in Vietnam

Language: Austro-Asiatic, Mon-Khmer, Eastern Mon-Khmer, Katuic, West Katuic, Brou-So

Dialects: 6 (So Trong, So Slouy, So Phong, So Makon, Chali, Kaleu)

Professing Buddhists: 50%

Practising Buddhists: 20%

Christians: 2%

Scripture: Portions 1980; work in progress

Jesus film: none

Gospel Recordings: Makong; So: Ban Lao; So: Muang Luang; So: Nhommarath; So: Phalane

Christian Broadcasting: none

ROPAL code: SSS

Status of Evangelization

