

The 3.4 million Shan people are one of the most prestigious of the Tai groups in Southeast Asia. They are concentrated throughout the state that bears their name—Shan State—in north-east Myanmar.<sup>1</sup> For a generation, the Shan Independence Army has fought against the Burmese military in a bid to gain independence. Thousands have died, but the Shan appear no closer to their goal than they were at the beginning of their struggle.

The Shan in Myanmar are the descendants of a large group who migrated southward from China in the 12th century. There are still many people in China today who are ethnically related to the Shan—such as the Tai Mao and Tai Nua—but research has shown that there is just one village remaining in China today whose inhabitants speak the same language as the Shan of Myanmar.<sup>2</sup> The Shan call themselves *Tai Yay*—meaning ‘Great Tai’.<sup>3</sup>

Over the years many Shan have migrated across the border into northern Thailand, where today they number more than 60,000 people in the provinces of Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai and Mae Hong Son. A small group of Shan lives on the other side of Thailand in Mukdahan Province near the Thai-Lao border.

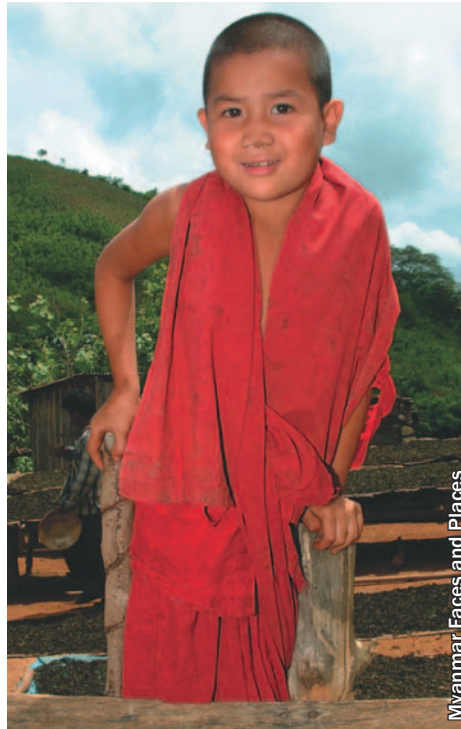
The Shan language is part of the large Tai linguistic family.<sup>4</sup> Southern Shan was traditionally written using a script

similar to Burmese, ‘which does not distinguish tone or some vowels’.<sup>5</sup>

The Shan have been firm believers in Theravada Buddhism almost since its introduction in Myanmar in the 5th century AD. Today more than 99 per

Buddha idols and spirits.<sup>6</sup>

Traditionally each Shan family has sent at least one son to a temple at the age of seven or eight, where they receive both a secular and religious education from the Buddhist monks.



Myanmar: Faces and Places

Missionaries first started reaching out to the Shan in 1860. They worked hard at translating the Scriptures into Shan. They first published portions of the Bible in 1871, followed by the New Testament in 1882 and the whole Bible in 1892.<sup>7</sup> The script that the missionaries used was the Burmese-like orthography, which most Shan believers today do not like. Several years ago a new Shan Bible, using a modern-day script, was published.

Historically, few Shan have responded to the gospel even though there are many vibrant churches in Shan State among other ethnic groups. The Shan tend to look down on their tribal neighbours, which creates a barrier of acceptance when the gospel is preached to them. In recent years, however, some encouraging breakthroughs have appeared among the Shan in Myanmar and among Shan

refugees in Thailand. God has used tools such as gospel radio broadcasts in Shan and the Shan Jesus film to expose many thousands of Shan people to the message of eternal life for the first time.

cent of Shan people are Buddhists. ‘Gold-coloured temples are scattered throughout the jungles and mountains of Shan State. All Shan community life is centred around their religion. Unlike most Buddhists who believe in *karma*, the Shan believe they are protected from evil by the spiritual power of



**Population:**  
3,260,500 (2000)  
3,663,000 (2010)  
4,115,000 (2020)  
**Countries:** Myanmar, Thailand, China, USA  
**Buddhism:** Theravada  
**Christians:** 30,000

## Overview of the Shan

**Other Names:** Tai Yai, Tai Yay, Sha, Tai Shan, Sam, Thai Yai, Thai Yay, Great Thai, Tai Luang, Ngio, Ngjow, Ngjow, Ngjao, Ngeoo, Niou, Ngjow, Ngjio, Nyaw, Sham, Sen, Tai Jai, Burmese Shan

**Population Sources:** 3,200,000 in Myanmar (2001, P Johnstone and J Mandryk)  
60,000 in Thailand (2001, P Johnstone and J Mandryk)  
500 in China (2000, P Hattaway) also in USA and probably other Western nations

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

Southwestern, East Central, Northwest

**Dialects:** 0

**Professing Buddhists:** 95%

**Practising Buddhists:** 65%

**Christians:** 0.9%

**Scripture:** Bible 1892; New Testament 1882; Portions 1871

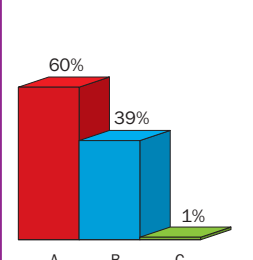
**Jesus film:** available

**Gospel Recordings:** Shan

**Christian Broadcasting:** available

**ROPAL code:** SJN

## 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