

The Shan

People Group Name

Tai.

Known as Thai Yai in Thailand, Dai in China and Shan in Burma. They call themselves Tai. Ethnically related to the Thai and Lao. Thai Yai or Tai Long means “Great Thai”. In relation to the Shan the Thai refer to them selves as Thai Noi or Lesser Thai. This shows the closeness of relationship between the two groups. The Thai say the word “Thai” means “Free” but the Tai do not have this meaning for the word in their language. The Burmese whose ancestors migrated from Tibet called the Tai Yai “s-i-a-m.” In the Burmese pronunciation of this word, the “s” and “i” are spoken as “ch” or “sh” while the “m” is pronounced as an “n.” Consequently “Chan” and “Shan” sounds the same as “Siam.” In addition to the Burmese, evidence from ancient times also exists that other groups such as the Chinese also called the people of the Tai family “Siam” or “Seam”. ...People of Lanna-Chiang Mai have called the Tai Yai “Ngiew” which actually has an insulting meaning. But all of these names: Tai Long, Chan, Shan, or Ngiew, refer to the Tai Yai people. [[Tai in Southeast Asia](#) by Teerabarb Lohitkun. English by George A. Attig, Nanthiya Tangwisutjitt Bangkok: Manager Publishing, 1995 (128 pages) p. 82].

Chinese use various names for the Shan but Bai- yi (yee) is a commonly understood designation.

Subgroups, 12 different

Tai Nue (Northern or Chinese Shan), Tai Lam or Dam (Black Shan of Laos, China), Tai Sa (Chinese Shan), Tai Mao (live along China/Shan State border), Tai Khuen, Tai Sipson Panna (Northern Shan State, China), Tai Kham Ti (Northern Shan State, Kachin State), Tai Lue (Lanna, Thailand; N. Laos, Xinxuangbana China—not otherwise covered in this profile), Tai Long (Thailand, Central Shan State), Tai Leng (Kachin, Shan State border), Tai Loi (Mountain Shan/Hill Shan), Tai Lai. There are many other groups who are more or less related to the Shan, but these are the largest groups who are the most closely related. All consider themselves “Tai” regardless of which group they belong to. Some would say only the Tai Long are Shan, while others would include all the groups in their understanding of who is Shan. The distinctions are not very important.

The relation between the Shan and the Tai Lue is confusing. Both are definitely Tai and if Tai = Shan then the Shan and the Tai Lue must be the same. Right? Well not exactly. Besides having a different script the Tai Lue have some particular religious practices including ancestor worship which are not found among the Shan who live west of the Salween River. Also the Tai Lue language has much in common with Northern Thai. It is best to say that the various Tai groups are arranged on a continuum and the Tai Lue are on the Eastern end of that continuum.

Language

Tai with dialects varying for each group. There are 5 tones (Chinese Shan have 6). The Shan have their own alphabet related to ancient Sanskrit and spoken language strongly influenced by Pali. Shan, like Thai, is built on 5 different tones. Though dialects vary, both script and spoken language have strong similarities. Burmese Shan is spoken with regional dialect differences, but dialects are close linguistically. Tai-Khae (Khe) may be a dialect. The Tai Mao have their own script, and southern Shan is traditionally written with a Burmese-like script which does not distinguish tone or some vowels. [[Ethnologue](#)]

The Shan language is one of the Tai languages and has affinities to Lao, Zhuang, Dai, Tai Lue, Thai, etc. Their script is based on Mon and mainly used in the Shan State and in a few Shan communities in Northern Thailand, in China on the border of the Shan State, and among Shan in the Kachin State. The old Shan script lacked clear delineations between certain vowel sounds and also did not distinguish tones. Since World War II a modified script has been introduced. At first it was closely linked to the Shan nationalist movement and some who sought to be politically neutral avoided using it but now it has gained widespread acceptance. The Shan also have their own numerals but Burmese numerals are generally more evident.

The Tai Mao in China have their own script as do the Tai Lue in China and the Khun in the Eastern Shan State.

Home countries/Geographic Distribution

NE Burma, China (Yunnan Province), Northern Laos, Northern Thailand. The Tai are found primarily in the more Central part of the Shan State of Burma. There are also about 40,000 living in villages around the city of Mitykyina (pronounced Mitch-na) in the Kachin State. Large communities are also found along the upper Salween in China, especially near the town of Yingjiang (approx. 98° E. Long. 24° 40' N Lat.) In Thailand there have been Shan in what is now Mae Hong Son Province since the 1870's. There are also large communities along the border in the Wiang Haeng, Chiang Dao, and Fang districts of Chiang Mai, and in the of Tha Ton, Mae Sa Long and Mae Sai Districts of Chiang Rai. In Thailand the Shan work primarily on construction sites, in agriculture, and in the sex and fishing industries. Much of the Thai economy depends on cheap labor from Burma. How many of these workers are Tai is unknown, though there is estimated to be over 300,000 Shan in Thailand. There are overseas Shan communities in the UK and USA as well.

Shan State Capital

Taunggyi. There were originally 32 states in the Shan States of Burma.

National symbol

The Shan symbol is a tiger. The Shan flag consists of horizontal yellow, green and red stripes with a white circle in the middle. Yellow stands for Buddhism and that the Shan are part of the yellow race. Green symbolizes the verdant landscape, a warm climate and rice farming. Red symbolizes the Shan's courage. The white disk is for the moon, the Shan's pure and peaceful spirit. It is forbidden to use this flag in Burma and Thailand.

Population

It is impossible to get accurate statistics due to the difficult situation in Burma. Also the population would depend on which of the many various Tai groups were included in the figure. According to some Shan leaders there are 30 million Shan in the world. According to the Burmese military regime, there are 4 million Shan in Shan State, making up about 10% of the population in Burma. There are estimated to be several hundred thousand Shan in Thailand. In recent years there has been a steady exodus of Shan from their home territory, resulting in the creation of a large Diaspora.

Note these statistics for Burma:

Population: 46,821,943 (July 1997 est.)

Age structure:

0-14 years: 37% (male 8,743,108; female 8,410,224)

15-64 years: 59% (male 13,878,541; female 13,859,783)

65 years and over : 4% (male 873,670; female 1,056,617) (July 1997 est.)

Population growth rate: 1.81% (1997 est.)

Birth rate: 29.54 births/1,000 population (1997 est.)

Death rate: 11.41 deaths/1,000 population (199 est.) **Net migration rate:** 0 migrant(s)/1,000 population (1997 est.)

Sex ratio:

at birth: 1.06 male(s)/female

under 15 years: 1.04 male(s)/female

15-64 years: 1 male(s)/female

65 years and over: 0.83 male(s)/female

total population: 1.01 male(s)/female (1997 est.)

Infant mortality rate: 78.5 deaths/1,000 live births (1997 est.)

Life expectancy at birth:

total population: 56.62 years

male: 54.89 years

female: 58.45 years (1997 est.)

Total fertility rate: 3.76 children born/woman (1997 est.)

Nationality:

noun: Burmese (singular and plural)

adjective: Burmese

Ethnic groups: Burman 68%, Shan 9%, Karen 7%, Rakhine 4%, Chinese 3%, Mon 2%, Indian 2%, other 5%

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If the population of Burma is 46,821,943 and the Shan comprise 9% of the population then the Shan population should be 4,213,974.

The population if the Shan State is estimated by various Shan leaders to be between 10,000,000 to 15,000,000 people. Non-Tai ethnic peoples in the Shan State may say they are Shan in the sense that they are inhabitants of the Shan State. This may or may not mean they speak Shan.

Health care, education and infrastructure

There is very little health care available, especially in rural areas. Shan often rely on fetishes or shamans when they need medical assistance. Many Shan are malnourished, their diet lacking in important vitamins. There is inadequate sanitation and lack of clean water. Life expectancy in Burma as a whole is around 56 years. High infant mortality rate (approx. 78.5 per 1000 nationally in Burma).

Very few Shan children have the chance to attend school. Local temples serve as schools in many villages. In the Thai national education system, the Shan are discriminated against, not being allowed to attend beyond the 6th grade, and are often treated poorly by the teachers. Neither are they allowed to read, write or speak in their own language.

The infrastructure in Shan State is highly deteriorated and all but destroyed after over 40 years of war. Most villages have neither plumbing or electricity. Many roads outside of Rangoon are not paved, and there are but a few airports. The SPDC is making an effort to improve the nation's image by doing all kinds of infrastructure improvement project, using forced labor to do so. The Shan have to build roads, bridges and the like, using the most primitive of methods and without any pay.

The infant mortality rate is quite high in Burma. Primary health care is a great need in the Shan State. Large towns have a wide selection of modern medicines for sale at prices that are reasonable by Thai standards. But even these are too expensive for peasants and day laborers who have no cash.

AIDS is a pressing problem in the Shan State where many women earn money in Bangkok and other Thai cities as prostitutes. 10% of the male population in Shan State is now reported to be infected with HIV, the highest infection rate in the region. Heroin is readily available, as are methamphetamines which are produced in mass quantities on the Thai-Burma border.

Malaria and tuberculosis go almost unchecked. Typhoid, typhus and cholera are all endemic on the Thai side of the border, and presumably are carried into Thailand by immigrants. This implies that these diseases are prevalent in the Shan State.

The Anglican Church has a primary health care training program and the Baptists have a free clinic connected to their church in Tachilek.

Phones are few and far between. Computers even more so. Roads are being paved but there are still parts of the Shan State that can only be reached by several days of travel by foot. Electricity is rare. Those who can afford diesel generators use them but it means that TVs and videos are the exception not the rule.

Bible and Literature

The first Bible in Tai Long script was completed 1892 by American Baptist missionary Josiah Nelson Cushing, using an old form of the language which only a few can still read. A new version of the NT, Psalms and Proverbs released in 1996 by the Thailand Bible Society. The TBS released the entire Bible in March 2003. While it uses the new script, this version uses traditional Shan Christian language and is difficult for Buddhist Shan to comprehend. Many consider another translation that uses everyday Shan language to be necessary. SIL has plans to translate the Bible into Tai Khuen and Tai Nue scripts.

Jesus Film available in Tai Nue.

Recordings of the New Testament in Tai Long are available from Voice of Peace/Audio Scriptures. FEBC has shortwave radio broadcasts every morning for one hour in Tai Long. There are a few tracts and some discipleship materials in Tai Long and Tai Nue.

Christianity Among the Shan

The Gospel first came to the Shan through Baptist missionaries from the USA in the 1860's. Anglican missionaries arrived in the late 1800's. While converts were sometimes slow in coming, history has shown that where sensitive missionaries labored diligently to overcome traditionalism and suspicion, often through the use of medical ministries, churches generally emerged. From the earliest times God raised up faithful Shan believers who were active in evangelism and Christian service. One "obstacle" to the spread of the Gospel was that extremely responsive tribal people such as the Kachin and the Lahu called for the attention of missionaries who had first come to minister to the Shan. Now, however, some of these tribal peoples are themselves able to assist in reaching out to their Shan neighbors. The Lisu have seen a whole Shan Buddhist families come to the Lord recently through their witness. In most cases the Shan believers moved out of their Shan communities and settled in the Lisu communities in response to persecution from neighbors; thus effectively preventing the possibility of a larger people's movement.

Presently there are probably over 10,000 Shan believers. Statistics are not clear. Some report 0.6% Christians. In some places, due to lack of local workers many Christians no longer attend services. Reports of large numbers of conversions in certain areas most likely refer to tribal rather than Shan

people. The Baptist and Anglican churches tend to be formal and not active in evangelism. Exceptional individuals are to be found who are zealously witnessing to Buddhist neighbors despite the indifference or even antagonistic attitude of fellow church goers. Various Shan Bible training programs exist. Their effectiveness is open to question.

FEBC radio reports regular responses to the Shan broadcasts. But follow up has been weak.

The Jesus film is now available in Shan. It was well received by Shan viewers in Thailand. It has not been widely used in evangelism in the Shan State primarily due to a lack of video players and movie projectors.

The Old Shan Bible in old script is out of print. A new translation of the New Testament in the modern script has been published and distributed. An updated addition of the entire Bible was published in March 2003, though distribution has been a problem. There is a definite need for Shan literature for evangelism and discipleship.

Religion

Theravada Buddhism mixed with Animism. There is no concept of an all-powerful, all-knowing God. The Shan believe in phi or spirits, which can cause good or evil in a person's life and must be appeased. Outside every village is a large spirit house where the village spirits reside. Each household also has their own, smaller spirit house and a spirit shelf inside the house where candles are lit and offerings made regularly. Their entire lives are governed by spirits, and each village has several spirit doctors and shamans which are consulted for the timing of weddings and funerals, planting crops, festival, for healing the sick, and placing curses or charms on people. Most Shan are terrified of spirits, though they are a normal part of their lives. There are numerous festivals throughout the lunar calendar year.

The Shan believe in reincarnation and that the good or evil done in one's life will determine their status and fate in the next life. In order to atone for wrongs done, a person must participate in merit-making activities, such as suffering a punishment of some sort or doing good deeds such as giving to monks and the local temple or helping out in a festival. The lowest form of reincarnation is to be born an animal such as a dog, cat, or even an ant, and the highest is to retire into a state of passionless peace. All women must be reborn as men before they can enter nirvana, therefore men have a higher status than women in religious matters. The Shan believe that only a devout few have any hope of reaching nirvana, as it requires total detachment from the world and its pleasures, and devout adherence to Buddhist law and custom.

The temple is the center of a Shan community. All Shan boys enter the monkhood for a short period of time, and it is considered a right of passage into adulthood. This occurs once a year during the hot season in a colorful festival and ceremony known as Poi Sang Long. Some become monks again later for a longer period of time. They believe that the way to happiness is to renounce the world and carnal desires. They also believe that the physical and the spiritual worlds are closely intertwined and even overlap.

Culture/Society

Shan culture, language, and heritage are in a state of crisis. They are gradually being assimilated into the Thai, Burmese, and Chinese groups. Most cannot read and write their own language. There is a lot of intermarriage between ethnic groups. In Thailand for example most Shan do all they can to become "Thai" and minimize the fact that they are Shan. Many Shan are in fact somewhat ashamed to admit that they are Shan. This is really done in out of fear in an effort to survive, and avoid discrimination, arrest, and exploitation. Never ask someone in public if they are Shan or if they are

Thai or Burmese, etc. It is only a matter of time before the Shan language and people disappear altogether.

The Shan have a rich cultural heritage and are a proud and sophisticated race. They are a gentle and peaceful people. Many of their customs are related to the Chinese, Burmese and the Thai. They have their own centuries old literature, art and history. Tattooing is common among Shan men. The tattoos are often Buddhist cantations or signs in a script similar to ancient Lanna or Khun, placed there in an effort to ward off evil spirits and protect the person from danger. Tattooing is also considered a sign of manhood in Shan society.

Shan society is very hierarchical and status conscious. Everyone has a place in the hierarchy, and it is important that they know where a newcomer fits in on that scale, as it sets the guidelines for the relationship. In addressing each other, the Shan use titles (such as “grandmother”, “uncle”, “little sister”, etc.) to express the person’s status or relationship to others. There is no such thing as equal relationships in Shan culture. One is either fulfilling the role of the patron or that of the client. This is also true in relationships between ethnic groups. For example the hill tribes are considered to be at the bottom of this hierarchy, the Shan above, that, and the Thai/Burmese/Chinese above the Shan.

A village headman, called Bumong rules villages, and above him is the district headman, called Buheng. The headman has the right to judge in various cases and is usually an elder chosen by the people for his wisdom. Shans have a group (cooperative) identity, rather than an identity as individuals. Families are closely knit (though many times broken) and extended families live together. It is common to have many children. Monks and the temple play a vital role in the village and are highly respected, teaching Buddhist ways and providing schooling for the children, and performing rites and rituals. There are several different leadership structures within Shan society: headmen, monks, the military, and saophas or princes. Men are dominant. In marriage customs, a boy find a go-between to ask the girl’s parents for permission to marry, and there is a dowry. Uneducated girls get married as young as 15 or 16. Educated people wait until they’re 18 or 20.

Holidays and Festivals

There is a traditional Buddhist holiday every month. For example in mid-April is Songkran, (or the Water Festival) that is celebrated by dumping buckets of water on anyone in sight. It also marks the beginning of the Buddhist year. Chinese New Year is celebrated in February. Most festivals are scheduled following the Lunar calendar. The candle-lighting festival takes place during the full moon of September. The purpose is to light candles to welcome the fourth god Goddama, who on that night came down from heaven to preach. In addition to Poi Sang Long, the biggest Shan festival is Poi Loen Sip Et which usually takes place in November. It is known for various displays of Shan culture (dancing, music) and extensive merit making activities (usually presenting offerings of food and flowers early in the morning at the temple and to the monks. It marks the day the Buddha came down from heaven to preach to his mother.

Dress

The clothing is usually colorful, women wear a wrap-around tube skirt called a longyi (or sarong) and snug fitting blouse, and traditionally wear their hair up in a bun with a colorful band wrapped around their head. Men wear baggy trousers and a Chinese-style shirt, sometimes with a turban.

Livelihood/Economics

Most Shan are rural farmers (rice, vegetables, soybeans, sesame and garlic), some are miners (rubies and other precious stones) and tree (teak) cutters. The staple of the Shan diet is rice with vegetables and meat, garlic, fermented soybeans and chili.

Those who don't own land often earn their livelihood through migrant labor such as construction or as day laborers in their village. Old methods are used and little machinery is available. Before 1996 the Shan were responsible for up to 50% of the world's opium production.

In Burma the monetary unit is the kyat. In Thailand, the baht and in China the renminbi. Inflation is out of control in Burma and most are finding it difficult to survive. The black market thrives. A day's wage in Burma is only a few cents, while in Thailand it is about a dollar.

The Shan are adept at surviving in the jungle, and can make or find nearly anything they need there. They build their houses and make things for everyday use out of materials found in the jungle and gather food and hunt for animals to eat. The Shan are clever silversmiths and weavers. They are also known for papermaking.

As the land opens up other resources will be exploited such as teak, gems, and fresh produce. As far as tourism goes the Shan State is as good as it gets. They have everything but ocean front property. Tourism will become a major draw in the future if the land ever gets a reputation for being peaceful. But since the Shan generally lack the education and the capital necessary to take advantage of the resources which they have it is likely that others will get rich and they will simply get exploited. Those who consider themselves friends of the Shan will therefore take steps to help develop good primary education in the land.

Climate

Tropical. The Shan plateau located in NE Burma is generally cooler than the rest of Burma and Thailand, since it is mountainous and higher in elevation. There is a cool, dry season from November to February, and a hot season from February to May, and a hot, rainy season from June to October.

History

There are references to the Tai peoples going back perhaps 4000 years in China. The origin of the Tai peoples is said to be that they were among the diverse groups living in Kwangsi and Kweichow provinces south of the Yangtze River before the southward expansion of the Chinese empire in the 2nd century BC. The present Tai people of the Shan State of Burma established a kingdom for a short period in the 13th Century A.D. The destruction of the Kingdom of Nan Chao in Southwest China by Kublai Khan set off a social-political chain of events which led to the establishment of a number of Tai-Thai-Lao kingdoms along southern boundary of China. The Shan or Tai took possession of the rich plateau that currently makes up Northeast Burma. While they were a political and military force to be reckoned with they have been for most of the past 700 years in conflict with or under subjection to their various neighbors, especially the Burmese. They, like the Burmese, received Buddhism from the Mon and developed their own written script from the Mon script. Their hilly terrain and thick forests discouraged communications. Numerous principalities emerged in the valleys and when they weren't fighting with the Burmese they often found excuses to fight with each other.

Burma became a part of British India in 1886, and in 1937 it was granted self-government within the British Commonwealth. When the British conquered upper Burma in 1886 they immediately send military expeditions into the Shan States. Most of the Chao Pha or Sawbwas of Shan States accepted the rule of the British in return for the privilege of maintaining the right to govern their states pretty much as they had before. As the sons of Sawbwa gained Western education they began efforts to modernize their territories. However the British government, despite the claims of the present Burmese, did not seek to divide and rule, but rather to amalgamate what they had conquered.

In 1922 the British created the Federated Shan States and the Federated Shan States' Council, under which peace and order were established for the first time in many centuries. During World War II, the Shan were loyal to the allies while the Burmese assisted the Japanese in invading the country. Many battles were fought in the Shan hills, and both the Allies and the Japanese bombed Shan towns, and in 1943 the Japanese ceded all but 2 Shan States. After the war British rule was restored. On Feb. 12, 1947, the Burmese nationalist leader Aung San and the leaders of the various ethnic groups signed the historic Panglong Agreement, setting up guidelines for the governing of ethnic minority groups in Burma and granting Shan State the right to secede from the Union after ten years. The result was that when Burma was granted independence in 1948 the Shan State was a part of the Union of Burma. The newly formed Union of Burma was scheduled to gain its independence on Jan. 4, 1948, and on paper everything was ready.

However Aung San and a number of the other leaders were assassinated on July 19, 1947, just a few months after the signing of the agreement, leaving the nation in a state of total chaos at the time of its independence. In an effort to create unity, Shan leader Sao Shwe Thaik was given the post of the first President of the Union of Burma, and U Nu was appointed the first Prime Minister. Then a Chinese army (KMT) invaded the upper Shan States, and the fighting spread until full-scale war developed. A Shan nationalist and resistance movement developed, and the central Burmese government became uneasy as the date (1958) approached when the Shan States had the right to secede from the Union.

The 34 Shan saophas gave up their rule on April 24, 1959 and the Shan States became Shan State, administered by an elected state government. The Burmese military became more and more powerful, and the Shan were unable to prevent attacks on their people through democratic means. The tension came to a climax in 1962 when General Ne Win staged a coup d'etat and took over the entire country, capturing and executing a number of the democratic government leaders. The new military leaders called themselves the State Law and Order Restoration Council, recently re-named the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). They re-named Burma Myanmar in 1989. In 1988 there was an extensive uprising among the people of Burma in protest to the military rulers. The military responded by slaughtering thousands of students and demonstrators.

The now well-established Mong Tai Army fought to protect the Shan people, but was also deeply involved in the growth and sale of opium. After the surrender of their leader Khun Sa to the Burmese in Feb. 1996, the selling and growth of illegal opium has all but stopped among the Shan, though it continues under the Wa and other ethnic groups allied with the Burmese. Khun Sa is now with the Burmese and is still behind the scenes of opium production.

In 1990 the SLORC allowed democratic elections in the country. Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy won in a landslide. However the SLORC refused to let the elected leaders take power and have kept Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest for most of the time since. In 1991 she won the Nobel Peace Prize.

Recent Political Developments

The Shan consider that the Panglong Agreement was not kept by the Burmese and that therefore they are not required to remain in the Union of Burma. Some seek autonomy within the Union. Others seek total independence. While few if any Shan like the Burmese the reality is that they have lacked the political and social unity to effectively throw off the yoke of the Burmans. Various rebel armies oppose the Burmese. Presently the Central Government is in control of perhaps half of the Shan State. The most powerful army is the Wa Army. The Shan State Army S.S.A. is also a force to

be reckoned with. Both armies have ceasefires with the Burmese but skirmishes continue. The Chinese support the aspirations of the Burmese military government in return for the strategic benefits of gaining access to the Andaman Sea. The Thai offer no support to their Shan cousins because members of the Thai military have arranged trading deals with the Burmese which are personally profitable. Lacking unity and allies there is little likelihood of seeing their aspirations realized in the foreseeable future. Their greatest hope lies in the European Community. Some Shan leaders have joined hands with the pro-democracy movement which has sought with varying degrees of success to convince the Europeans to put economic pressure on the SLORC leaders of Burma to return the country to civilian rule. If and when a democratic government is established Shan leaders might have a greater opportunity to take steps towards local autonomy. But unless a single popular leader emerges a united Shan State is unlikely.

Right now Taunggyi and Lashio are firmly in Burmese hands. Hsipaw is open to foreigners as there is a ceasefire between the S.S.A. and the Burmese. Kengtung is of great strategic importance and firmly held by the Burmese. In the middle of the triangle formed by these cities a conflict is going on.

SPDC's policy toward the Shan

Perhaps one of the reasons the Burmese military regime (State Peace and Development Council) suppresses the Shan is so that they can gain control over the wealth of natural resources in Shan State, where the majority of all such resources in Burma are found. The SPDC has a 5-part strategy for controlling the Shan. 1) Mount a military offensive against the area. 2) Forcibly relocate all villagers to sites under direct Army control. 3) Use the relocated villagers and others as forced labor, portering and building military access to roads into their home areas. 4) Move more Army units in and use the villagers as forced labor to build bases along the access roads. 5) Allow the villagers back to their villages, where they are now under complete military control and can be used as a rotating source of extortion money and forced labor, further consolidating control through "development" projects, forced labor, forming for the army, etc. If resistance attacks still persist at this stage, retaliation is carried out against villages by executing village elders, burning houses and other means.

The aim is to cut food, funds, intelligence and recruits provided to the insurgent groups by local villagers. Civilians are the primary targets for attacks that intensified to an unprecedented scale in 1996.

Problems

Trafficking of young Shan girls into Thailand who are sold into prostitution is a major issue. Poverty and disease (such as malaria and AIDS), poor nutrition and lack of education are a few more. The ongoing war has destroyed much of the infrastructure, and Shan live in constant fear of attack from the Tatmadaw or SPDC (Burmese Army). Torture, extrajudicial killing, rape, plundering and burning of villages, forced labor, forced relocation and forced military service have affected every Shan. As a result, tens of thousands of refugees have fled to Thailand. In March 1996, shortly after the surrender of Khun Sa and his Mong Tai Army, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) stepped up their campaign against the Shan, and the flow of refugees increased (over 80,000 in the last 2 years).

The Shan are denied refugee status in Thailand, unlike the Karen and other ethnic groups of Burma, thereby hindering humanitarian assistance from organizations such as the UNHCR from reaching them. After arriving in Thailand, they are treated as illegal migrants, denied identity papers, and are often deported back to Burma, thrown in prison, killed or fined. They are left to the mercy of

unscrupulous employers who take advantage of the low-cost labor, often refusing to pay workers and threatening to expose them to the Thai authorities. The financial crisis in Thailand has only served to make it harder for the Shan, as Thai authorities have initiated a repatriation policy with the intention of allowing the Thai labor force to fill the positions held by Shans. Many Shan are stateless, being illegal in any country they reside. According to the UN, there are one million internally displaced people in Burma and may be hundreds of thousands of displaced people in Shan State.

Even though Burma is rich in natural resources, it is the world's seventh poorest nation, and was designated "Least Developed Nation" by the United Nations in 1987.

Barriers to the gospel

In 1962 all foreign missionaries were expelled from Burma after General Ne Win of the Burmese military staged a coup d'état and took over control of the country. The Shan are traditionally resistant to Western influence and to the gospel, at least in part due to negative experiences during the British colonization period. Christianity is seen as a Western religion and there is a lack of a Shan way of "doing church". Western forms are often adopted, though there is one church on the Thai-Burma border who is making headway in the area of funerals, a very important part of Shan culture. "To be Shan is to be Buddhist", they say of themselves. The idea of eternal life seems to them irrelevant, as the goal of Buddhism is to seek for passionless peace. A high illiteracy rate makes it difficult for Shan to read the scriptures, although it is not unusual for them to speak several languages (Chinese, Burmese, and Thai).

The existing Shan church in Shan State is often lacking in desire and initiative to reach out to their Buddhist neighbors. There is a Christian sub-culture that is hard for new believers to break in to. Distribution problems of Bibles, Jesus films, evangelism and discipleship materials. Persecuted believers often live a life of compromise or move to a "Christian village".

Doors for the gospel

The concept of forgiveness is not known in Buddhism, as the Shan believe that each individual must pay for his own sin and that there is no other atonement. Therefore the message for forgiveness in Christ is valuable to them. Neither does Buddhism provide any answer for where the world came from. Some have come to faith through hearing the Genesis story.

Devout Shan Buddhists are waiting for the revelation of another (5th) god named "Maitrea", meaning "great world teacher". Buddha predicted that this god would bring the final revelation of the way of salvation. Serious Shan Buddhists keep an empty room in their houses, in expectation of the coming of this god.

There is an annual festival called "Kan Taw" in which the younger village members visit the elders, bring them gifts, and ask for forgiveness for the offenses of the previous year. The elders in return then say a blessing over the younger visitor.

Many ethnic groups living side-by-side with the Shan are Christians. They can be encouraged to reach out to their Shan neighbors, however there is the problem that most of them are lower status hill tribes. However most of these tribes speak the Shan language.

The concept of an almighty God who has power over all spirits can be a significant factor in Shan turning to Christ. Oftentimes healings and other miracles have occurred after which people have turned to the Lord.

Prayer requests

1. Pray that the suffering of the Shan will lead them to seek after the true God.
2. Pray that the Shan will be granted refugee status in Thailand, so that they can receive humanitarian aid and assistance.
3. Pray that there will be unity among Shan leaders and that they will lead their people with wisdom and righteousness.
4. Pray for more dedicated missionaries to commit themselves to church-planting among the Shan. Pray that these workers will have wisdom in how to best minister to the Shan.
5. Pray that God will raise up indigenous Shan church planters who will plant churches in areas where foreigners are not allowed.
6. Pray for open doors and hearts among the Shan.
7. Pray that the bonds of Buddhism/Animism, suffering and repression will be broken.

Sources

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For more information on the Shan-Tai people and how you can be involved in reaching them, write:
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