



Location: Approximately 25,000 Lao people live in Myanmar, with most concentrated in Tachileik District in Shan State's Golden Triangle area, where Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos intersect across the Mekong River. The 2015 Laos census recorded 3.4 million Lao people in their homeland. An additional 388,000 live in Thailand, 140,000 in France, and 137,000 now reside in the United States, with significant communities in the San Francisco Bay and Sacramento areas of California, Minneapolis, Dallas, and Seattle. Many American-based Lao families arrived in the late 1970s as refugees after the Vietnam War, during which more bombs were dropped on Laos than on Vietnam. Significant populations of Lao people can also be found in Cambodia, Vietnam, Canada, and in numerous other Western nations.¹ These numbers do not include 19 million Isan people in northeast Thailand, who are closely related culturally and linguistically to the Lao yet have retained their own identity.

Identity: Identifying Lao people in Myanmar today is a challenge, as they often blend in with Shan,

Khun, and other Tai-speaking groups, where languages and cultures often overlap. The Lao people in northeast Shan State, who may be known locally as "Yun," first appeared as "Lao Shan" in the 1901 census of Burma, when they had a population of 1,047 people. That number rose to 7,205 three decades later. Of those, 201 were Christians and the rest were Buddhists, with a few animists. The Lao continue to be recognized by the Myanmar government as one of the country's ethnic groups.

Language: The Lao are one of the great Tai-speaking peoples of Asia, alongside groups like the Thais of Thailand, the Shan of Myanmar, and the Zhuang of China. They are not to be confused with the Lao Naga tribe in western Myanmar, which is a Tibeto-Burman speaking group completely unrelated to the Lao.

History: The ancestors of the Lao people are believed to have migrated south from China into Southeast Asia approximately 1,000 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.²

Customs: The Lao are renowned for being a gentle, friendly, and peace-loving people. Their communities revolve around close-knit family ties. It is common to find families with ten or more children in Laos, which has one of the highest birth rates of any country. Most of the Lao in Myanmar are engaged in farming or fishing, with some growing fruit and cotton. Their houses are typically built on stilts and are made of wood or bamboo, with chicken and livestock roaming beneath the floorboards.

Religion: Although nearly all Lao people identify as 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."³

Christianity: Catholic missionaries first entered Laos in the 17th century, but Evangelical Christianity never took root until the late 1800s, when Presbyterian missionary Daniel McGilvary and his team entered Laos from their base in northern Thailand, winning 3,000 Lao converts over the years.⁴ Since the start of the new millennium, the Church in Laos has experienced strong growth. Although as many as 100,000 (3%) of Lao people in Laos are Christians today, in Myanmar the status of Christianity among them is unclear, and they remain unreached. One of the biggest obstacles to their evangelization is 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.... And I must have nothing whatever to do."⁵



Population in Myanmar: 25,000 (2025)

Location: Shan State

Language Family: Kra-Dai

Main Religion: Buddhism (93.0%)

Christians: 750 (3.0%)

OVERVIEW

Population: 25,000 in Myanmar (2025 Joshua Project)
7,205 (1931 census)
1,047 (1901 census)

Other Countries: 3,430,000 in Laos
388,000 in Thailand
140,000 in France
137,000 in USA
25,000 in Cambodia
24,580 in Canada¹

Other Names: Laotian, Lao Noi, Lao Shan, Lao Tai, Lum Lao, Phou Lao, Rong Kong, Tai Lao, Tai Sar

Location: Shan State: Tachileik, Mong Yawng, and Mong Hpayak townships in Tachileik District

Language: Lao [lao]

Dialects: 6

Scripture: Bible 1932
New Testament 1926
Portions 1906

Jesus film: Lao

Global Recordings: Lao #999

People ID: 12989

