

Ethnic groups in Thailand

Ever since the end of the 19th century Thai governments have tried to build a strong national identity based on 'being Thai'. In 1894 king Chulalongkorn commanded every citizen in the kingdom to describe himself as 'Thai' in the census, and prohibited the use of other ethnic designations. In the Northeast the following proclamation was issued:

From this time forward all officials from every level and every department, whether they are heads of large *muang* or small, whenever there is a survey of families or whenever a citizen comes requesting some official documentation from the government representative, be informed that you are to perform your duties in a new way. In the column for nationality you are to write only 'Thai Siamese' in all cases. It is now absolutely forbidden to use or write in the column for nationality 'Lao', 'Khmer', 'Say', 'Phi Tai', or the name of any other nationalities formerly employed. His majesty has proclaimed that all are 'Thai' nationals and in fact have been since the beginning of recorded time and has thus made this decision through the Ministry of the Interior.¹

Though in recent history the government is not taking things to such an extreme, the emphasis on being Thai is so strong that it is very common to see people from other ethnic groups hide their background, especially when moving into the cities. At the same time it is quite clear that ethnic distinctions exist in Thailand. Table 3 presents statistics for the main groupings.

Table 1. Percentage of population per ethnic group in Thailand

Ethnic group	Percentage of population
Thai	77.3
Central Thai	32.2
Isaan	26.6
Northern Thai	10.6
Southern Thai	7.9
Chinese	10.5
Malay	6.0
Khmer	2.4
Other ethnic minorities	3.0
Foreigners*	0.8

Source: World Christian Database

* The number of foreigners does not include temporary guest workers and illegal immigrants.

The Thai are the largest ethnic group in Thailand. They are not monolithic. The central Thai, about 20 million strong, traditionally have been the dominant group in society. From their midst came almost all government officials. The northern Thai, about 6 million, are heirs to the heritage of the Lanna kingdom in Chiang Mai. The southern Thai, living on the peninsula, have been influenced by living close to the Malay. Both the northern and the southern Thai speak a dialect that is quite different from that spoken by the central Thai from Bangkok, which is taught in schools throughout Thailand.

The fourth group of Thai, besides the central, northern and southern Thai, is the Isaan. They are almost as numerous as the central Thai. The reason they are called 'Thai' rather than 'Lao' is more political than ethnographic. They are descendants from Lao people flocking into Northeast Thailand, and many still call themselves 'Lao', though many people, including the younger generation Isaan,

¹ Quoted in Paul H. DeNeui, *String-tying Ritual as Christian Communication in Northeast Thailand*, Ph.D. thesis, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, 2005, p. 78.

nowadays consider that to be a pejorative term. The Isaan are the poorest of all Thai, living on the relatively dry and infertile Khorat Plateau. Their language is closely related to Lao, but has been influenced more and more by central Thai because of the school system and television. They are looked down upon by the other Thais. All four sub-groups of Thais are the subject of research in this study.

The second largest ethnic group in Thailand is formed by the Chinese. Chinese have been part of Thai society for many centuries. Bangkok has always been a city that is in majority ethnic Chinese. In the beginning of the 20th century street signs in Bangkok were in Chinese, and Teochiu, a Chinese dialect, was the main language. The start of World War II ended the Chinese immigration, and after the war consecutive governments tried to assimilate the Chinese into Thai society. Even today probably a majority in Bangkok, and significant numbers in other cities, have some Chinese ancestry. The Chinese have adopted Thai family names, and most Chinese nowadays speak Thai at home. In the 2000 census, only 120,000 people were found who still use Chinese at home. There also has been significant intermarriage between the Thai and the Chinese communities, to the extent that there is not a clear distinguishing line between Thai and Chinese.

The third largest ethnic group in Thailand is the Malay. The large majority of Malay people are living in the deep South, close to the border with Malaysia. In the past they have been part of small Malay kingdoms, but in the course of history they ended up in the kingdom of Thailand. That this still is not accepted by everyone is proven by on-going separatist violence in the South.

The fourth largest ethnic group is the Khmer, living in Northeast Thailand close to the border of Cambodia. They are looked down upon even more than the other inhabitants of Isaan.

There are over 50 other ethnic minorities in Thailand. The largest of these groups is the Karen. Others include the Hmong, the Lahu, the Lawa, the Mon, the Phuthai and the Shan². Most of these ethnic groups are tribal, and listed by the Thai government as 'mountain people'. They mainly live in villages in the mountainous jungle area along the border with Burma. All have their own culture and heritage. Their distinct ways of life, though rapidly changing, make their villages a major draw for tourists.

While the Chinese are being absorbed into Thai society and adopt the Thai language, this is not the case with the other ethnic minorities. Though all youth are fluent in Thai because that is the language they are educated in, the ethnic minority communities are strong enough to maintain the use of their own languages. They are increasing in relative size. The language tables of the national census show that among the youngest age group the percentage of Malays, Khmer, and tribal people is about 1.5 times higher than among the general population.³

(This article is paragraph 2.3. in: Marten Visser, *Conversion Growth of Protestant Churches in Thailand*, 2008.)

² Raymond G. Gordeon, (ed.), *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, 15th edition, Dallas, 2005.

³ National Statistical Office, *The 2000 Population and Housing Census: the Whole Kingdom*, Bangkok, 2002: Population Table VII.