TAI LAING

တိုင်းလေ



Omniglot

Location: More than 100,000 Tai Laing people are scattered across a wide area of northern Myanmar. Most live in the Sagaing Region, especially Homalin Township in Khamti District. Tai Laing villages are dotted along the banks of the Chindwin, Ayerawady, and Uru rivers, while in Kachin State they typically dwell along the railway line that runs from Myitkyina to Bhamo and further south to the Mandalay Region. There are two dialect groups of Tai Laing. Those living along the river call themselves "Tai Lai," while those located along the railway line use the name "Tai Nai."

Identity: The autonym of this fascinating group is Tai Laing, meaning "Red Tai." The Burmese similarly call them Shanni, meaning "Red Shan." In the past few decades, the Tai Laing have experienced a cultural revival as they have reconnected with their ethnic and cultural roots. The British rulers of Burma viewed the Tai Laing as a mixed Shan and Burmese ethnicity, listing 23,296 in the 1931 census.[1] Many people in Myanmar today still call this group "Shan-Bama," indicating a blend of Shan and Burmese people.

Language: The Tai Laing language is closely related to Khamti and Shan, but contains characteristics separate from both. They have their own variant Burmese script, although for many years it was considered a crime to use it, so it was not taught in schools.[2] Although there are two dialect groups among the Tai Laing, the linguistic differences between them are minor and they have no trouble understanding each other. Tai Laing is also spoken by the Taman tribe in the Sagaing Region, replacing their own language, which became extinct during the last 50 years.

History: Tai peoples have lived in northern Myanmar for at least 1,000 years, and over several centuries small groups have migrated south and west from their original homelands. The Tai Laing largely appear to have followed the Khamti, who spread as far as Assam in northeast India. When some communities reached new areas, they encountered Burmese people with whom they settled down and intermarried, creating a new mixed ethnicity. In the 1890s a missionary wrote: "They are the traveling traders of the country, bringing large numbers of ponies and products for sale to the people of Burma. They have no independent government of their own but are subject to the authority of the land where they happen to be."[3]

Customs: The Tai Laing are usually liked by the other ethnicities they interact with and have been described as "an active, intelligent, and enterprising people, occupying many positions of trust and responsibility. In religion they are Buddhists who are excessively bigoted and hard to evangelize."[4] For a time the Tai Laing attempted to attract tourists to experience their beautiful culture and hospitality,[5] but the 2021 coup stopped that effort. The Burmese junta is suspicious of the Tai Laing because of their links with the Kachin, while the Kachin Independence Army is suspicious of them because of their links with the Burmese. Both sides have forcibly enlisted Tai Laing men to fight for them. This peaceable group now finds itself accused by both sides of aiding the enemy and has become entangled in the civil war.[6]

Religion: Theravada Buddhism has dominated life among the Tai Laing and their Shan forefathers since it was introduced to the region in the 14th or 15th century. The animistic religion of nat (spirit) worship has endured to the present, with people believing in a host of spirits and deities that must be placated for their communities to enjoy peace and good harvests.

Christianity: Although they have lived alongside Christian groups, including the Kachin Jingpo, Naga, and Tangshang, for many decades, only one percent of Tai Laing people are estimated to be Christians today. No part of the Bible has ever been translated into their language, nor has the *Jesus* film been produced for this precious and unique people group.



Population in Myanmar:
116,000 (2024)

Location:
Sagaing Region, Kachin State

Language Family:
Kra-Dai

Main Religion:
Buddhism (99.0%)

Christians:
1,160 (1.0%)

OVERVIEW

Population:
116,000 in Myanmar (2024 Joshua Project)
100,000 (2010 Ethnologue)
23,296 (1931 census)

Other Countries:

Other Names:
Laing, Red Tai, Shan-Bama, Shan Bamar, Shan Kalee, Shan Ni, Shanni, Tai Laeng, Tai Lai, Tai Lang, Tai Lay, Tai Leng, Tai Ling, Tai Nai, Tai Naing

Location:
Sagaing Region: Homalin Township in Khamti District; Kachin State: Myitkyina and Bhamo districts

Language:
Tai Laing [tjl]

Dialects: 2

Scripture:
None

Jesus film:
None

Global Recordings:
Tai Ling #22550

People ID: 20584



Religious adherence

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For more information please see Endnotes