

The Thai: A People Still Unreached

Independent Thai remain politically free and true to Buddhist heritage. Most also worship a multitude of demanding spirits.

Sweet cream flavors your Thai tea; fiery spices in the steamed rice moisten your cheeks. The faces are warm, full of smiles. The dark eyes are bright, and the favorite phrase is “*Sabay, sabay, klun Thaitech*”—“Easy and beautiful is the life of a Thai.” Thai are the soft-spoken, gracious people whose ancient ancestors settled the central floodplain of Thailand. The 54 million Thai are a beautiful people who seem to be blind to the God-given value of their beauty.

Background

Thai means “free.” And this majority people group of Thailand pride themselves on their thousand-year history of remaining free. But to be independent, the Thai have often bartered away their land, their resources and their souls.

Thai ancestors are a central-China people called the *Tai*, who migrated into Southeast Asia about AD1000-1300 and established the Kingdom of Siam in the 1500s. The West has portrayed the lush land of old Siam in popular musicals such as “The Land of Smiles” and “The King and I.”

Thailand is the only Southeast Asian country to avoid colonialization. In the 1800’s, the shrewd negotiations of Thai kings played colonial powers as the Dutch and British against each other. Parcels of Thai territory were also bartered off to these European colonialists to keep Thailand free.

The Thai Today

Today the Thai are a strong force in the business economy of Southeast Asia. But to gain that commercial status, they have sold off many of their natural resources including the world’s last

teakwood forests. The resulting flooding and soil erosion has driven tens of thousands of rural families to the city—principally to the overcrowded capital of Bangkok.

Bangkok itself, a megalopolis of six million, is a maze of polluted canals, lovely parks, nightlife glitz, Chinese-backed business centers, crowded slums and houses of prostitution—the number one tourist trade.

Photo of
smiling Thai
here

Religion

A saying in Thailand is: “To be Thai is to be Buddhist.” The Thai also believe that all people must be reincarnated as Thai in order to achieve *Nirvana*—the state of pure nothingness desired by Buddhism. But that is far from a sure guarantee—no one can ever be sure that he or she will ever attain that. Hence as Buddhists they live in a constant state of passive spiritual resignation.

To the Buddhist, life itself is an illusion and has little value. Man is fated to the endless cycles of reincarnation. Theravada Buddhism is atheistic. (It is also called Mahayana, or the “Smaller

Vessel” or “The Way of the Elders.”) There is no god and man has no soul, so Buddhism has been unable to satisfy true spiritual need. Most of the Thai practice Buddhism as a cultural life-style.

Spirit Worship

For spiritual power, the Thai look to the ancient rites of animism—to the spirits they call the *phi* (fee). Overlaid with the Buddhist trappings, spirit worship is a religion of fear. All of the *phi* must be appeased and equally acknowledged, be they spirits of the river, or of the trees, of the rice fields or of the house.

These spirits hold real power over the gentle Thai. Most Thai have sold their souls—deemed worthless by Buddhism—to these spirits in order to gain some control over their destinies.

For 2500 years the Thai have remained relatively free politically. They continue to look for freedom and meaning in materialism and in the easy bondage of Buddhism. We need to pray for the Thai to be set free in Christ—to be set free indeed!

Unreached

Portuguese Roman Catholic missionaries brought Christianity to the Thai 500 years ago. Protestant missionaries arrived in the 1830’s. Today there are more than 70 mission groups working in Thailand with 1,030 missionaries!

Christianity has flourished in the tribal hill people groups of Thailand, but the ethnic Thai have *never responded* in sufficient numbers to sustain an indigenous church movement. Less than 1% of Thai are Christian. Christianity is still seen as Western or Chinese, and to be foreign is not good.

Compromise has made evangelism

ineffective in the small Thai church. Chinese and Chinese-Thai leadership in churches discourages ethnic Thai participation.

Unresponsive

Photo here of Thai mother and child

Even with a Bible, with churches and missionaries the Thai are an unreached people because *they have not responded* to the Gospel.

The Land

- * Area: 173,877 Sq km—a little larger than Sweden.
- * Capital: Bangkok.
- * Avg. elevation is 50 meters.
- * Thailand is dominated by a central alluvial plateau.
- * Thailand is one of the world's leading producers of tin.
- * Some 2/3 of workers are in agriculture yet it generates only 1/4 of GNP.
- * The region shows a continuous residency of more than 20,000 years.

The Thai People

Population:

- * 50 million.
- * 40% are under 15 years old.
- * 40 % are between 15 and 29.
- * Life expectancy: 64 years.
- * Minority populations include: Chinese, Malays, Khmer, Karen, Semeng, Lao and Lawa.

Life in Thailand:

- * 30% urban, 70% rural.
- * Best equipped military in Southeast Asia.
- * Severe problems with drugs and prostitution.
- * Language has 44 consonants and 32 vowel signs

Religion:

- * 95% Theradvada Buddhists, strong Animism.
- * Less than .05 % Christians.

Pray for the Thai.

- * **Pray** that God will use even economic trends and international events to accentuate the Thai's need for true liberty, and to show that answers don't lie in Buddhism, *phi* worship or materialism. Pray for Christian businesses to demonstrate to the Thai the value of the individual and human life.
- * **Ethnic Thai** music is extremely sad revealing an underlying anguish in the hearts of the smiling Thai. Pray that cultural Thai Christian music will be composed and aired on one of the 14 Christian radio broadcasts in Thailand.
- * **The root problem** of the Thai may be that they do not value the God-designed human soul. Deprived of real worth, Thai will readily sell their hearts to the spirits, and their minds to the philosophical practices of Buddhism even their land and people for short-term profits. Pray that Christian cartoons on TV, Christian comic books and other literature will begin to reach Thai children

Thailand map here

before they are indoctrinated with Buddhist beliefs that rob them of their true worth before God.

- * **Pray** against the spiritual forces that exploit the Thai tendency to prostitute themselves—to put themselves in bondage in order to appear “free.”
- * **Pray** that the Thai people will hear the Gospel as a message of hope from their loving Creator—not a creed or message of foreigners.

For Further Study

- * John C.S. Girling, *Thailand: Society and Politics*, 1981.
- * Pamphlet of the *Tribal Research Center of Thailand*, Tribesman and Peasants in North Thailand, 1967,: 1969.
- * Masashichi Nishio, “Public Health in Thailand,” *Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol 16, no 1, 1964.
- * Burt Modowell, Thailand: “Luck of a Land in the Middle,” *National Geographic*, p. 500-535, Oct. 1982.
- * Elizabeth Wagner, *Tearing Down Strongholds: Prayer for Buddhists*, \$9.95 fro William Carey Library, P.O. Box 40129, Pasadena, CA 91114.
- * *IJFM* Vol. 10 No. 3, July 1993, Special Feature Edition on Buddhism.

For unreached people prayer cards and additional information on Buddhism, Islam or Hinduism etc., write *IJFM* or: **Adopt-A-People Clearinghouse, P.O. Box 17490, Colorado Springs, CO 80835**