



The Shan

History and origin of the Shan

The Shan originate from China from which they migrated to their present homeland in the 13th century. Over the years, the area where the Shan live has seen many wars and conflicts as China, Thailand and Burma have fought with each other over its control.

After the British colony of Burma gained independence in 1948, the tensions between the Shan and the Burmese could not be resolved. When the military toppled the government of Burma in the 1960s, the Shan rebelled. China and Thailand supported different factions of the rebels. This led to a long and difficult period marked by many casualties among the population, lawlessness, the rule of cruel warlords and drug production as a means of financing the war in the area known as the “Golden Triangle”. Over the years, hundreds of thousands of Shan were forced to flee within Burma or to Thailand and China.

Only after military rule ended in 2010 did the majority of rebels put down their weapons. However, the pain and memories from the past 40 years live on.

The Language

Shan is a tonal language which is related to the Thai and Lao languages. There are five dialects within the Shan language.

Where do the Shan live?

10 percent of the population of Myanmar, an estimated 5 million, are Shan. They live mostly in the eastern part of the country. The Shan State is about four times the size of Switzerland. Another 300'000 Shan live across the border in China and close to one million live in Thailand and Laos.



The Shan State is a hilly plateau with dense forest cover. The Salween River which originates in China cuts across the State. Due to its elevation, the tropical climate is slightly more moderate than in the lowlands of Myanmar.

Above all, the Shan are a farming people many of whom still work their fields with buffalos and wooden plows. The staple foods are rice, garden produce,

vegetables and fruit. The timber trade and mining for precious stones are important sources of income. The production of drugs under the control of warlords continues to be a sad reality. Due to a lack of work opportunities, many Shan from Myanmar are forced to migrate to Thailand and China where they work as manual laborers, often exploited and underpaid. Many girls are sold into prostitution and HIV/AIDS has become a major problem among the Shan.

In general, life is very hard for the Shan in Myanmar as they have to live with malnutrition, limited medical care, widespread drug abuse and insufficient sanitation. The average life expectancy is under 60 years. Education is in a poor state, teachers are not sufficiently qualified and many children don't even make it to the sixth grade.

Religion

Religion is an important and defining part of Shan culture and everyday life. The Shan beliefs are a mixture of Buddhism and Animism. The temple is the center of every community. Most boys will spend some time as monks in a temple.





Buddhism

The concept of Buddhism rotates around the task of doing good works and renouncing worldly desires so that one will be re-incarnated in ever higher forms of life, eventually reaching Nirvana. Every month a Buddhist holiday is celebrated. The festival of Songkran (Water Festival) in spring marks the beginning of the Buddhist year. Poi Loen Sip Et is the most important Shan festival. It takes place in November and is full of song, dance and music but also a time of making offerings at the temple.

Animism

Besides Buddhism, the worship of spirits plays an important role in the Shan religion. In the opinion of the Shan, spirits rule the invisible world and bring happiness or disaster to mankind. Much time and effort is devoted to appease the spirits, to ask their guidance for every aspect of life. Many Shan are terrified of the spirits and live in constant fear.

Christianity

Baptist missionaries started to work among the Shan in 1861. The Bible has been available in the Shan

language for over 100 years. In 2003 a modernized translation was completed. After foreign missionaries had to leave Burma in the 1950s, the church in Burma had to stand on its own. Today it is estimated that the number of Shan Christians in Myanmar is between 6'000 and 7'000. In Thailand, where missionary work continues to this day, the Shan have not responded well and the Shan Church numbers only about 1'000 believers. Very little is known about the Shan churches in China and Laos but there are probably not more than 1'000 Shan Christians in these two countries. Besides the Bible, very little literature is available in the Shan language. Out of North Thailand, there are regular Christian broadcasts in the Shan language.



History of IPC's involvement with the Shan

IPC's involvement with the Shan goes back to a missions class which was held in the winter of 2001. The topic "Vision for the Nations" made the participants wonder how they could get involved in world mission. Everybody felt that the "Adopt-a-People" program was a good way to start because it would help IPC to focus on a specific people group. Over the summer of the same year, after much prayer and research, the group felt that the Lord was pointing them towards the Shan people. In the morning worship on March 3, 2002, the Shan were

introduced to the congregation with a short presentation and prayer. Ever since, IPC has been praying for and giving to the Shan. Some of our members have visited the Shan and IPC has regular contact with missionaries to the Shan in Myanmar and Thailand.

How we can pray for the Shan

- That the Lord will bring peace to the Shan who have suffered so much in the past
- That the Lord will help those who suffer from drug and gambling addiction, HIV/AIDS and prostitution
- That the Shan church will grow in numbers and inner strength so that believers will stand firm
- That the Bible will be read by more Shan and for funds to translate it into additional dialects
- That the Jesus film will be widely shown in the Shan State and that many will want to find out more about Jesus
- That the Shan who have fled to foreign countries will meet with Christians who want to reach out to them.
- That the Shan will experience a church planting movement and start to reach out to people of other ethnic groups.



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