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Language and Ethnicity on the Korat Plateau*

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1.) Method of Study

The purpose of this paper is to use linguistic criteria as the base for identifying the ethnic groups on the Korat Plateau. The main reason for using linguistic criteria for collecting data and classifying the ethnic groups are 1) Language is normally a convenient, accessible, observable and objective symbol of group identification. The differences in the languages used by different groups of people in this area are generally quite obvious. It is therefore relatively easy for the people to answer the questionnaire about what language they and their neighbours speak in the home. 2) Language spoken in the home is generally a strong indicator of ethnic identification. If one has shifted the language spoken in the home, very often there is no tie to the former ethnicity. 3) Sometimes it is rather difficult to answer the question of which ethnic group one belongs to. It also is sometimes politically sensitive. 4) Even though language group and ethnic group are not identical, knowing about the languages involved can be a key to the understanding of ethnic groups.

The ethnolinguistic data presented here is based on The Ethnolinguistic Map of Thailand[1] research project conducted by Suwilai and others at Mahidol University. The main purposes of this research project are to:

1) develop a database for ethnic languages spoken in Thailand. The information will include the number of speakers and the geographical distribution of various languages across Thailand.
2) produce geographical maps showing the distribution of each individual language as well as languages (at different levels) within different geopolitical areas.
3) publish a manual describing each ethnic group and its language.

The Project's data was collected between 1992-1995. The method of study is to work with the data at the village level. There are altogether about 65,000 villages all over Thailand. The questionnaires were designed and sent out to key local personnel at the village level, such as village headmen, district or subdistrict officers, provincial cultural center personnel, local school teachers, health personnel, and development workers. The responses were then computerized. Field work for data rechecking was conducted at certain places and on certain ethnic groups by the researchers of this project and in cooperation with the linguist or specialist who works on each ethnic group.

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*The authors would like to thank Mr. Ekaphong Suwankaset, ILCRD, Mr.Greg Lyon and Mr. Philipp Dill of SIL and Ethnolinguistic Map Project, ILCRD, Mahidol University for producing the language maps and Dr. Robert Bauer and Dr. Christopher Court for helpful discussions.

[1]This Ethnolinguistic Map project is funded by the Office of the National Culture Commission, Thailand.

This project uses computer technology in both the areas of data base management and cartography. The program CDS-ISIS developed by UNESCO has been used for language data base management. For representing data in map form, the language data was linked with the Ministry of Interior's village data base (which contains the geographic coordinates on the village level) for mapping at the provincial, district and subdistrict levels. It has been found that the matching at the provincial level can be done at 100%, at the district level 99.9%, at the subdistrict level 99%, and at the village level at 89-90%. However, a lot of time is being spent on the base map for the geopolitical boundaries of Thailand which is not available at the moment so that the distribuition of the village data can be presented at the subdistrict level (final result). The GIS - SPAN software is used for representing the distribution of all the ethnic groups.

This ethnolinguistic map project represents the first step of investigation. It can be used as a resource for selecting locations for doing research in specific areas of interest, e.g. language contact, language change, and demographic studies. The data base is very flexible, therefore other information can be added to expand the maps potential for varied uses. If the data base is updated from time to time, it would display developmental trends in all of the reporting areas. As a general base for longitudinal studies, it will reveal trends toward language shift involving both the national language and minority languages. It would thus be a helpful tool for educational planning and language planning. It might also reveal historical patterns of migration as well as diffusion and change of dialects and language contact features.

The picture of ethnolinguistic groups is normally dynamic. However, as a starting point for our analysis, it is presented at one point in time. Since at the present time the languages of wider communication, such as those used for interethnic group, national and international communications and mass media, are very influential and the ethnic minorities are very much endangered, it is therefore the purpose of this ethnolinguistic map project to describe the present situation of ethnic languages in Thailand and to develop a language data base, and to map the geographical locations of languages. However, information from written and oral histories, stone incriptions, ancient ruins or buildings, linguistic documents, etc. are also brought into consideration.

The knowledge of ethnolinguistic groups gained from this ethnolinguistic map of Thailand will build a strong appreciation for the diversity of ethnic groups within the country. At the same time, it will help to enhance the self-image and self-confidence of the minority group peoples by showing them basic facts regarding their own group, such as numbers of speakers, location of speakers, density of language population, description of its culture and language, etc.

2.) Languages and Ethnic groups on the Korat Plateau

Southeast Asia is one of the most linguistically and ethnically diverse areas of the world. Peoples in this area speak a great number of languages belonging to five language families: Austro-Asiatic, Austronesian, Tai-Kadai, Sino-Tibetan, and Miao-Yao. Thailand, situated right at the heart of Southeast Asia, exemplifies well

Southeast Asian linguistic and ethnic diversity. In Thailand at least 60 languages belonging to these five language families are spoken[2]. These languages and speakers are distributed across various regions of Thailand.

2.1 Findings

The ethnolinguistic groups found on the Korat plateau belong to two language families, Austroasiatic and Tai-Kadai. All over the country, there are about 21 Austroasiatic languages. They all belong to the Mon-Khmer subgroup. There are 24 Tai-Kadai languages. They all belong to the Tai subgroup.

Twenty languages are found spoken in this region. They are 1) 9 Mon-Khmer languages: Northern Khmer, Cambodian Khmer, So, Bru, So (Thavung), Kuy, Nyeu, Nyahkur, Vietnamese (see Appendix 1.1) and 2) 11 Tai languages: Thai Isan/Lao, Lao (PDR), Phuthai, Nyoh, Yooy, Kaloeng, Saek, Phuan, Thai Korat, Thai Loei (Lao Lom) and central Thai (see Appendix 1.2). Please note that in certain areas there are Khmer from Cambodia, Lao from Laos (PDR). There are also some Chinese speakers (belonging, of course, to the Sino-Tibetan language family), especially in the town areas. The distribution and number of speakers of each ethnolinguistic group in various provinces of Northeast Thailand are provided in charts 1 and 2 and maps 1 to 18.

The following list shows the number of provinces, districts, subdistricts and villages in which each language is spoken.

Nyahkur is spoken in 2 provinces, 3 districts, 4 subdistricts and 6 villages. 2,911
Northern Khmer is spoken in 9 provinces, 84 districts, 309 subdistricts and ~~6~~ villages.
Kuy/Suay is spoken in 12 provinces, 65 districts, 144 subdistricts and 1419 villages.
So is spoken in 6 provinces, 18 districts, 16 subdistricts and 176 villages.
Bru is spoken in 6 provinces, 6 subdistricts and 7 villages.
So (Thavung) is spoken in 1 province, 1 district and 3 villages.
Vietnamese is spoken in 8 provinces, 30 districts, 37 subdistricts and 98 villages.
Thai Isan/Lao is spoken in 19 provinces, 272 districts, 2142 subdistricts and 23,021 villages.
Thai Loei (Lao Lom) is spoken in 3 provinces, 15 districts, 89 subdistricts and 772 villages.
Saek is spoken in 1 province, 2 districts, 2 subdistricts and 5 villages.
Kaloeng is spoken in 6 provinces, 6 districts, 18 subdistricts and 175 villages.
Nyeu is spoken in 4 provinces, 10 districts, 12 subdistricts and 97 villages.
Phuthai is spoken in 10 provinces, 77 districts, 151 subdistricts and 1,396 villages.
Nyoh is spoken in 10 provinces, 62 districts, 114 subdistricts and 1,102 villages.
Yooy is spoken in 3 provinces, 12 districts, 13 subdistricts and 122 villages.
Phuan is spoken in 4 provinces, 36 subdistricts and 257 villages.
Thai Korat is spoken in 5 provinces, 83 districts, 185 subdistricts and 1,881 villages.
Thai Klang is spoken as a second language in all 19 provinces of the Northeast.

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2. The charts showing the five language fa milies and languages belonging to each language family found in Thailand is provided in Appendix 1.

Cambodian Khmer is spoken by small groups of refugees in various provinces in lower Northeast Thailand.
Lao (PDR) is spoken by small groups of refugees in various provinces.

From the charts and the list above we can see that at the present time on the Korat plateau Lao speakers are in the majority. There are more than 11 million speakers who make up 71% of the population in this area. However, there are also 19 other ethnolinguistic groups. There are more than 1.2 million Northern Khmer speakers on 8% of the population. There are smaller groups such as Thai Korat with more than 500,000 speakers or 3.3%, Phuthai with more than 400,000 speakers or 2.92%, Kuy/Suay 2,6% and Thai Loei 1.45%. Other groups, such as Yooy, Saek, Nyeu, Nyahkur (Chaobon), Cambodian Khmer, Vietnamese, and So-Bru, spoken by population that are less than 1% of the total population of the areas. Most of the ethnolinguistic groups in this area have the history of migration mainly from the other bank of Mekhong river to this area. Only the Northern Khmer and some small Mon-Khmer groups such as the Nyahkur have been staying in this area for a long time and have no history of migration. It is noticeable that about 6% of the population in this area speak central Thai or Thai Klang due to the influence of the educational system and modern mass media.

It is a fact that language is naturally changing all the time. The change may be fast or slow and the direction of change is determined by the surrounding situation. On the Korat plateau language loss (language death), language shift and language change have been observed. So (Thavung), a Mon-Khmer (Vietic) language which migrated from Kam Muan in Laos to Thailand about 100 years ago and was just discovered a few years ago, is still spoken in a village (Nongwaeng) and two adjacent villages (Nongcaroen and Nongmuang) in Songdao district, Sakonnakorn province whereas in other villages in Kalasin and Udornthani the speakers have already lost their proficiency in So and speak Lao in their daily life instead. Even in the Nongwaeng village and the two adjacent villages, a situation of language shift and language change has been documented (Suwilai 1995, 1996). Many social factors and the negative attitude towards their own ethnic language are major causes in shifting from So (T) to Thai-Lao, a more prestigious language. As for the language change many people, especially the younger generation, relexified their ethnic language to the Lao-Ngoh language and at the same time rephonologized some aspects of their phonological system to the Thai-Lao system. That is, there is a change from the original M-K register system to a tonal system. However, the change is not yet completed. Two systems are therefore co-occurring at the present time. This phenomenon may happen to other languages as well, such as some of the So-Bru (Katuic) languages which are developing tones. Some of the Kuy/Suay villages have shifted their language to Lao or Khmer and are thus called Lao-Suay or Khamer-Suay. They relexified their language but still keep their own phonological system. They speak Lao or Khmer with Kuy accent (Preecha, 1988). This may also be a case of Kaloeng which some people believe to be originally a Mon-Khmer language. However, it is now linguistically a Tai language (subbranch of Lao). It might have once been a Mon-Khmer language that has already completed the relexification and rephonologization process to become a Lao language with its own accent.

2.2 Discussion

2.2.1 Early Settlment. It is generally believed that Austroasiatic language is the substratum of other languages in mainland Southeast Asia. At present there are about 150 Austroasiatic languages divided into thirteen subgroups (Diffloth 1980) found in a wide area all over mainland Southeast Asia. A number are in danger of extinction. In Thailand there are about 21 Austroasiatic (Mon-Khmer) languages. The Korat plateau was an area of ancient civilization. It may be possible that the original people on the Korat plateau were Mon-Khmer. They might have been the Khmer and some other Mon-Khmer groups. Nowadays on the Korat Plateau more than one million Khmer speakers are found in 10 provinces. Surin, Buriram and some parts of Srisaket is the core of the Khmer speaking area. This Khmer variety has been cut off from the Khmer of Cambodia. They are called /khmɛːr lɤː/ or Northern Khmer. The Khmer spoken here is quite distinctive. It still keeps original Khmer characteristics such as final trill /r/ which has been totally lost in Cambodian Khmer pronunciation (Suwilai 1994). Apart from that, there is evidence of the long standing Khmer presence from the Khmer temples, buildings, ruins and stone inscriptions in this area. Even though nowadays Mon is not found spoken in this area at all, stone inscriptions in Mon have been found. It is belived that once Mon used to live in this area in the past (Christian Bauer, personal com.) Moreover, there are the Nyahkur/Chaobon who speak a language which is closely related to Mon. Its phonological system is very similar to the old Mon inscription (Diffloth 1980 and Theraphan, 1984). These people are belived to be the descendants of the ancient Mon.

However, the various Tai groups have had the history of migration from the other side of the Mekhong River to this area.

2.2.2 Village names. The village names often indicate their geographical features (high land, paddy field, swamp etc.), resources (iron, salt etc.), history (name of the village settlers, important events, function of the village), prominent local flora and fauna, ancient buildings (Khmer temple), and names of the ethnic groups (Lao, Suay, Vietnamese, etc.). In many areas words from the languages spoken by the ethnic groups who are living there are used as the village names. The study of village names in Muang district, Surin Province which is the Khmer core area in Thailand shows that 90% of them have a Khmer origin. At the same time in looking at the village names in Jompra district which is the Kuy-speaking area we observe that about 70% of the village names are in Kuy (Suwilai and Sukhumavadee 1984, Naraset 1996).

2.2.3 Names of ethnolinguistic groups. As in other regions, there are also certain problems about the names of the ethnolinguistic groups in this region. One ethnolinguistic group may be called by more than one name, such as 1. Kuy /Kuay/ Suay or 2. So/Kha/Kha Kaso/Bru. At the same time, one name may be used to call more than one group, e.g. So can refer to both the So (Katuic) or So (Vietic) which are two totally different languages. This is the problem of the ethnonym and autonym, the name the people call themselve, and the exonym or the name outsiders call an ethnolinguistic group. Kuy and Kuay are the ethnonym meaning "human being". They are the names for the two different varieties of this language, whereas Suay is an exonym referring to the group of people who sent the tribute to the capital. The So, Kha, or Kha Kaso are the exonym. The meaning is not so clear, but not respectable,

whereas Bru is an ethnonym meaning "human being". Very often some subgroups have accepted the name others call them, such as the So of Kusuman, (Sakonnakorn) and the So of Songdao (Sakonnakorn). These two groups are actually different. Kusumarn So linguistically belongs to the Katuic subbranch of MK, whereas Songdao So linguistically belongs to the Vietic subbranch of MK. The data collected in this ethnolinguistic map project includes all the names by which each group is called. However, only the name the native speakers use or accept others to call them and at the same time, the name generally known and accepted by surrounding people to call this particular group are considered for labelling the ethnic groups in this research.

2.2.4 Bilingualism. It is noticeable that in certain areas of the Korat plateau nowadays the people are switching their primary allegiance from one or other of the local ethnic languages of Korat plateau to central Thai. This phenomenon is becoming more and more widespread because of the influence from both formal education and the mass media. However, the majority of the people are bilingual or multitingual so that they can speak their ethnic language as well as central Thai, the national language, and/or Lao, a regional language. In the lower part of Northeast Thailand Northern Khmer is also used as a lingua franca.

2.2.5 Extra-regional extension of ethnic groups. The distribution of an ethnolinguistic groups on the Korat plateau is not normally limited only to the area in Northeast Thailand, but extends across the regional boundary, e.g., the Khmer, Kuy and Nyoh groups extend to the East, the Lao Isan extends to almost all regions in Thailand and the Khmer across the country (see map 19 to 21).

2.3 Language, ethnicity and regional development

The Korat plateau or Northeast Thailand which is one of the dry areas of SEA is an area of economic underdevelopment and poverty. However, it is the area which is rich in cultural and historical assets and the home of diverse indigenous cultures and ethnic groups. To understand this area knowledge about the various ethnic groups who live here is essential. The understanding of the ethnic groups may involve various criteria such as language, religious beliefs, history, way of life, etc. At the same time the respect for differences in world views would build the self-esteem and self-confidence of these ethnic groups. These facts should form the basis for any community development programs in this area. Neither economic nor educational development programs will be effective without the real participation of the local people.

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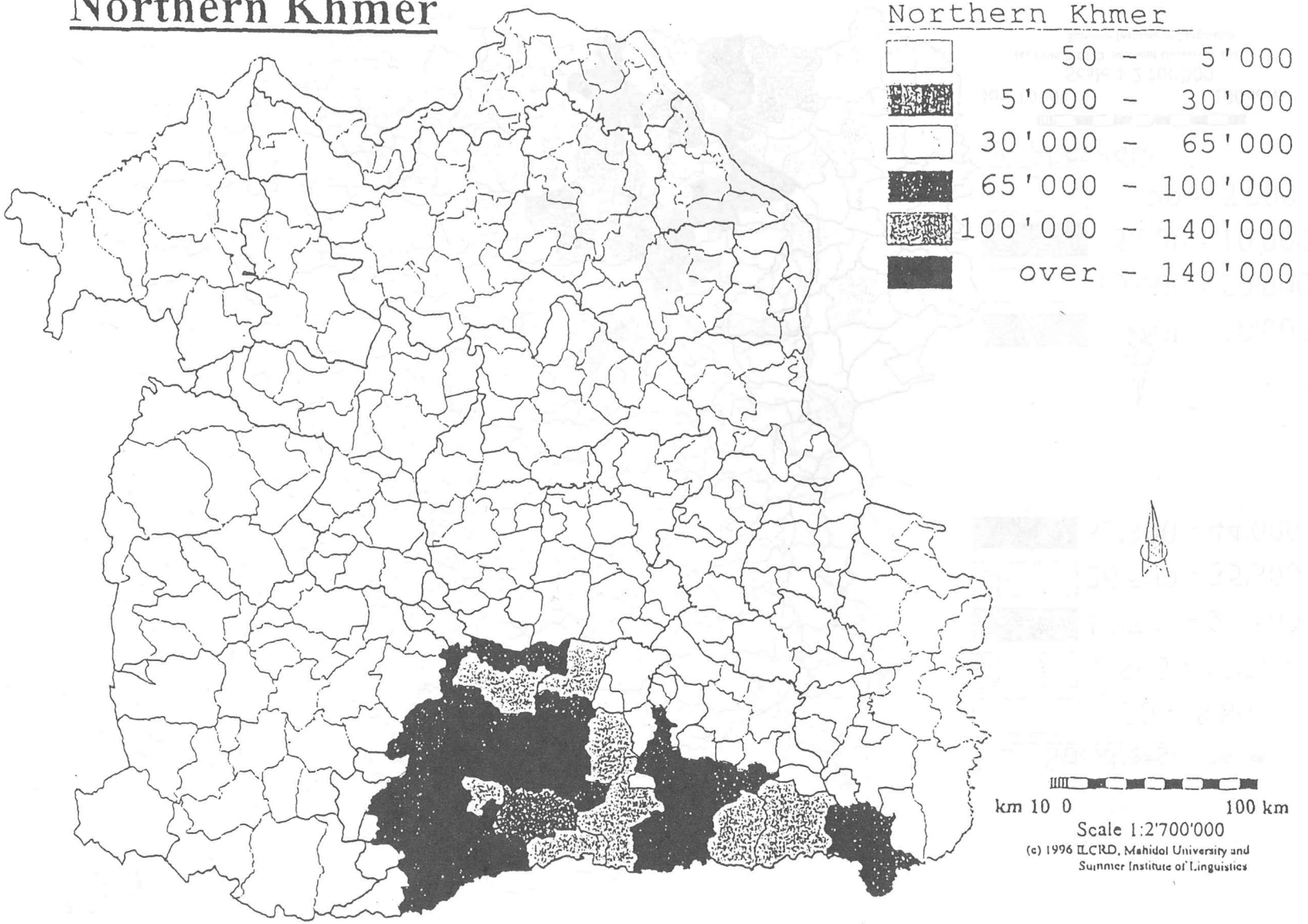
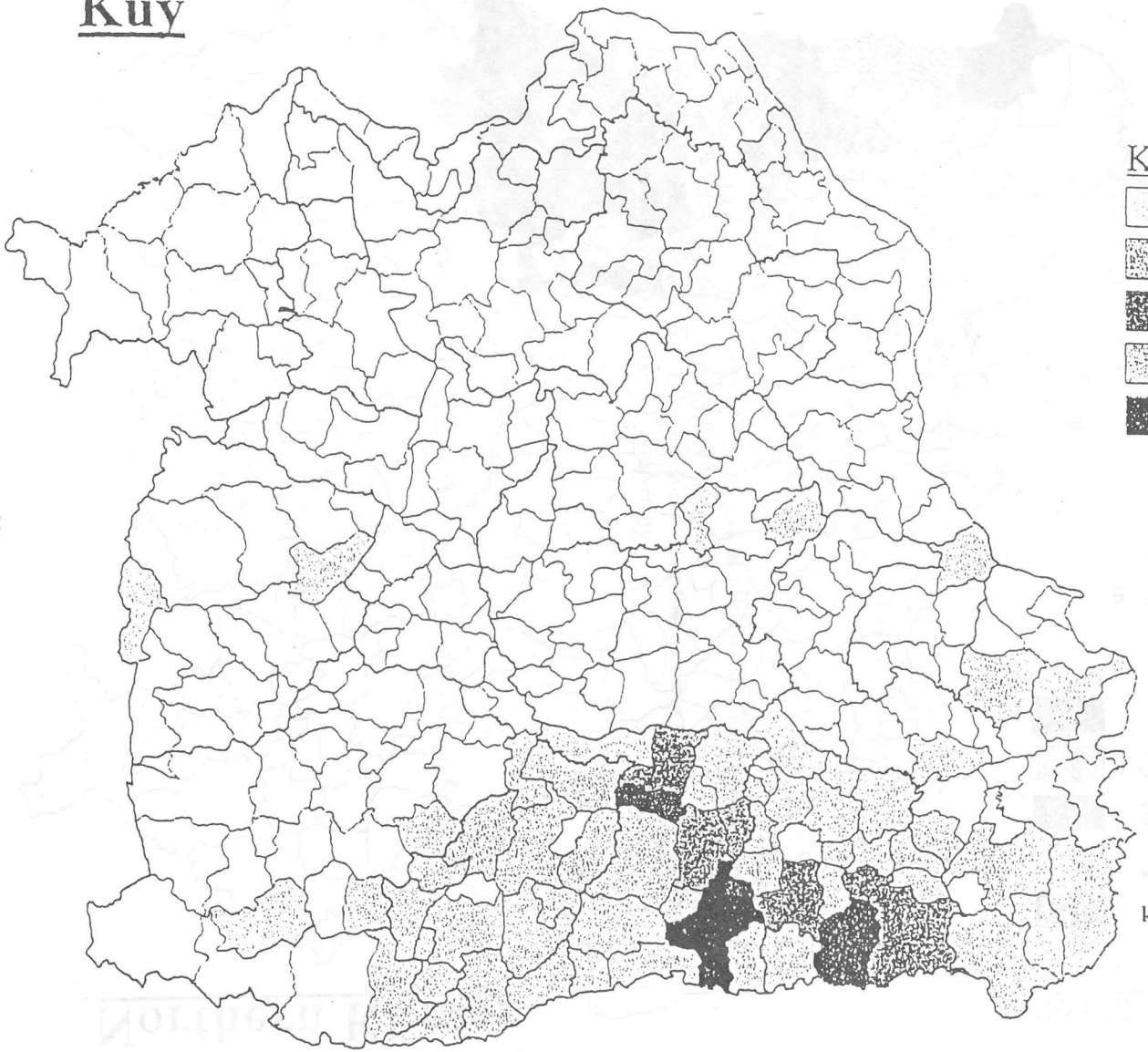
Abbreviations

MK = Mon-Khmer
MKS = Mon-Khmer Studies
JLC = Journal of Language and Culture
ILCRD = Institute of Language and Culture for Rural Development

Northern Khmer



Kuy



Kuy Speakers

50 - 8'800

8'800 - 17'700

17'700 - 26'500

26'500 - 35'300

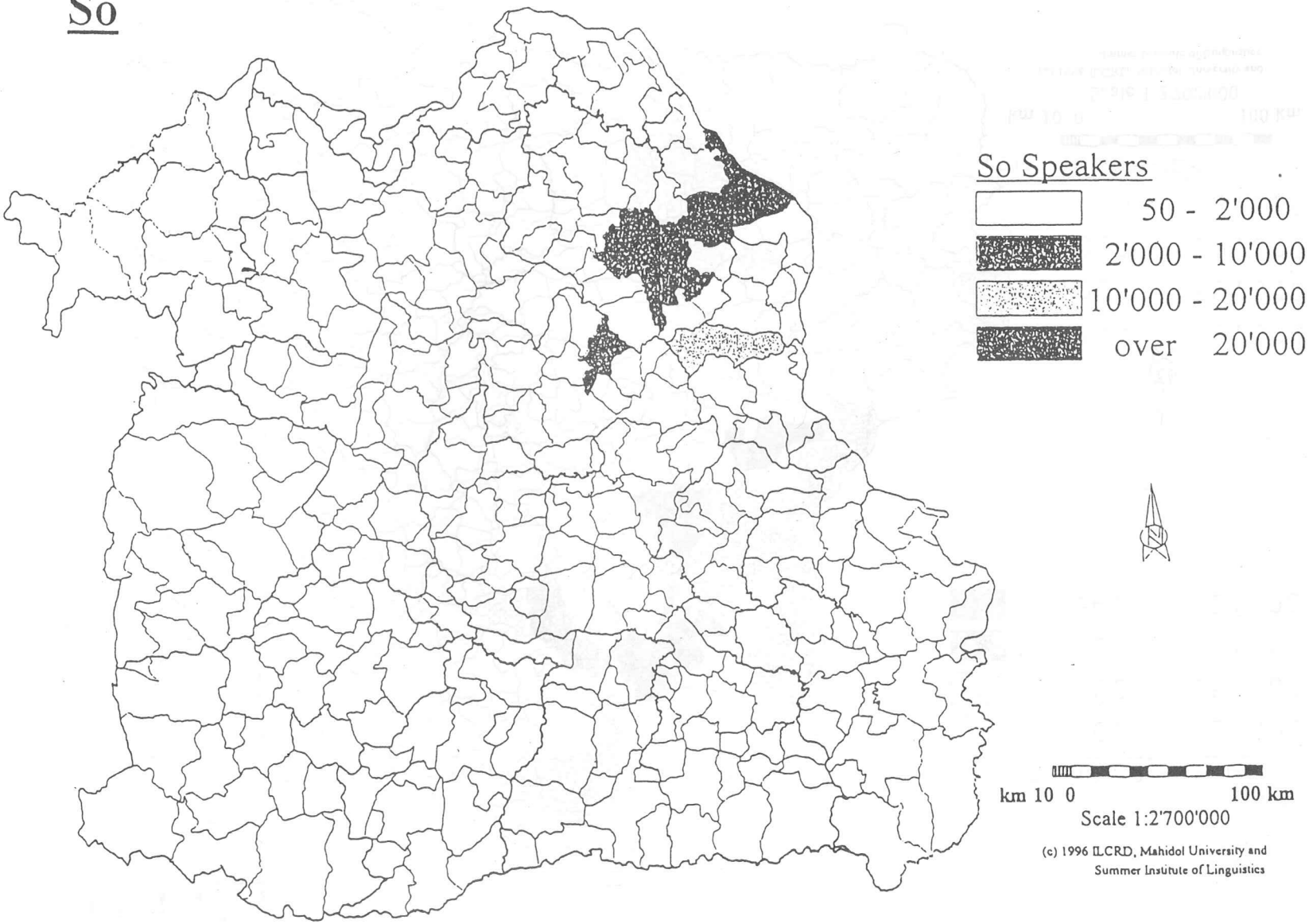
35'300 - 44'000

km 10 0 100 km

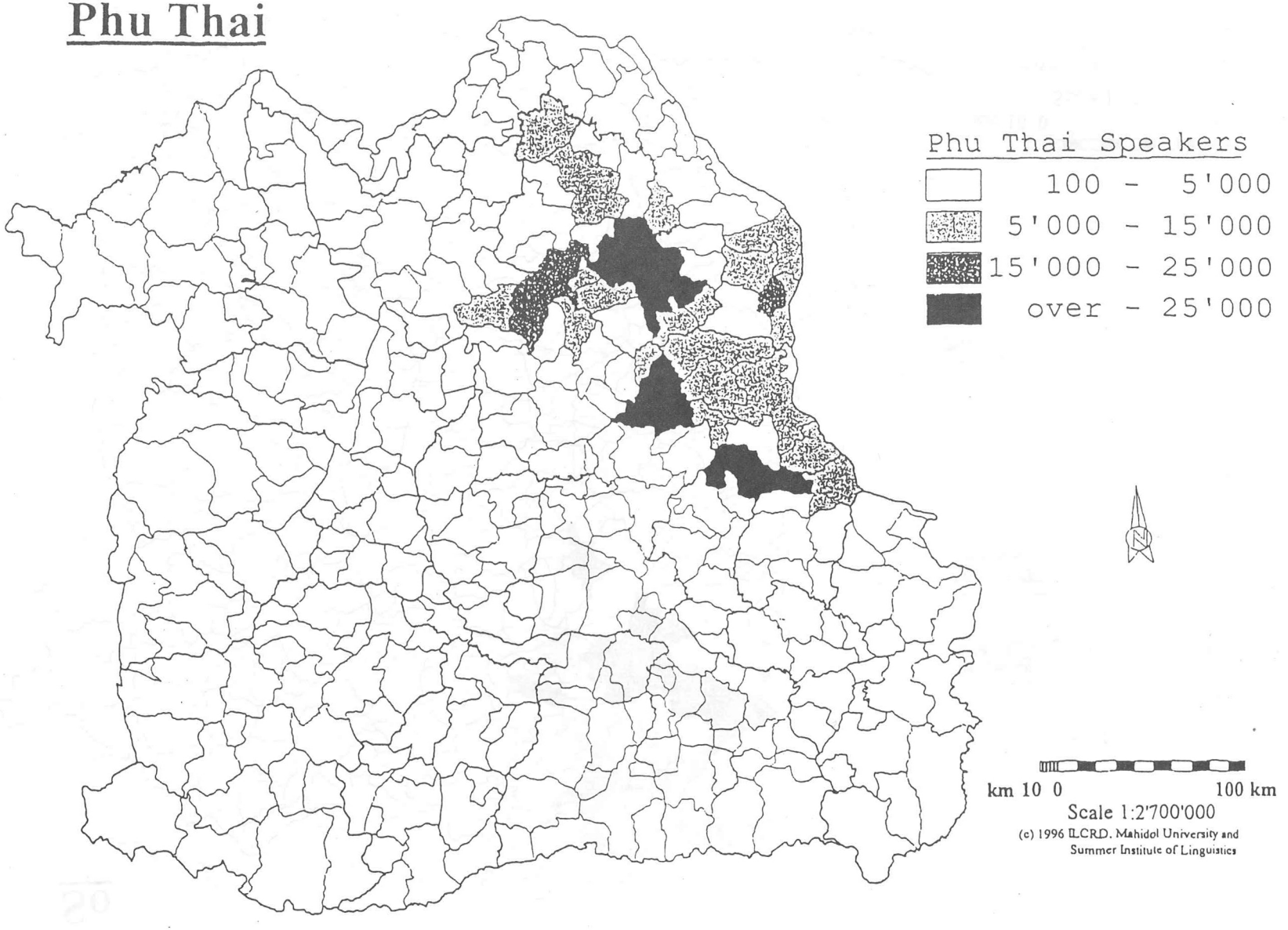
Scale 1:2'700'000

(c) 1996 ILCRD, Mahidol University and Summer Institute of Linguistics

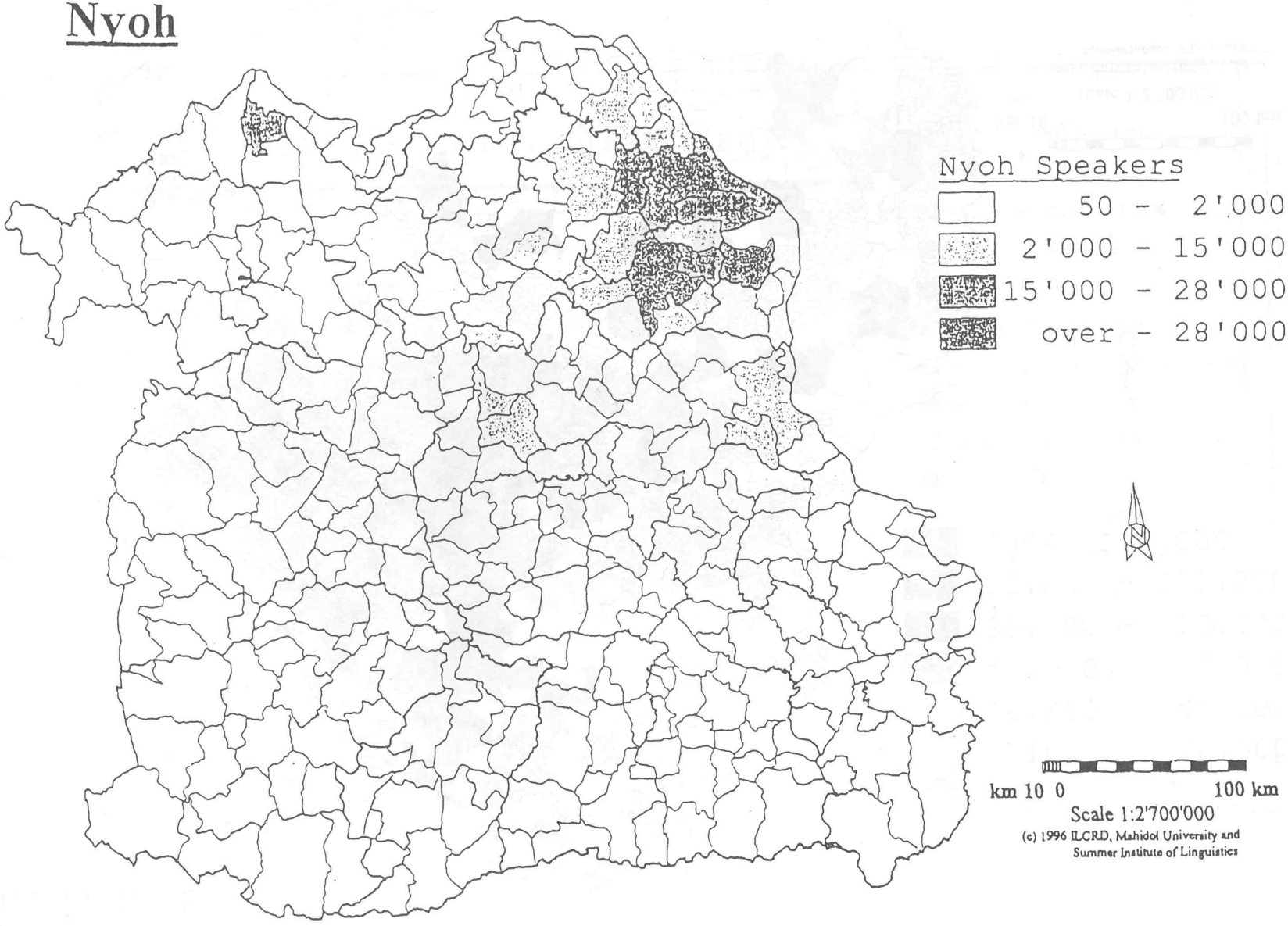
So


So Speakers
50 - 2'000
2'000 - 10'000
10'000 - 20'000
over 20'000
km 10 0 100 km
Scale 1:2'700'000
(c) 1996 ILCRD, Mahidol University and Summer Institute of Linguistics

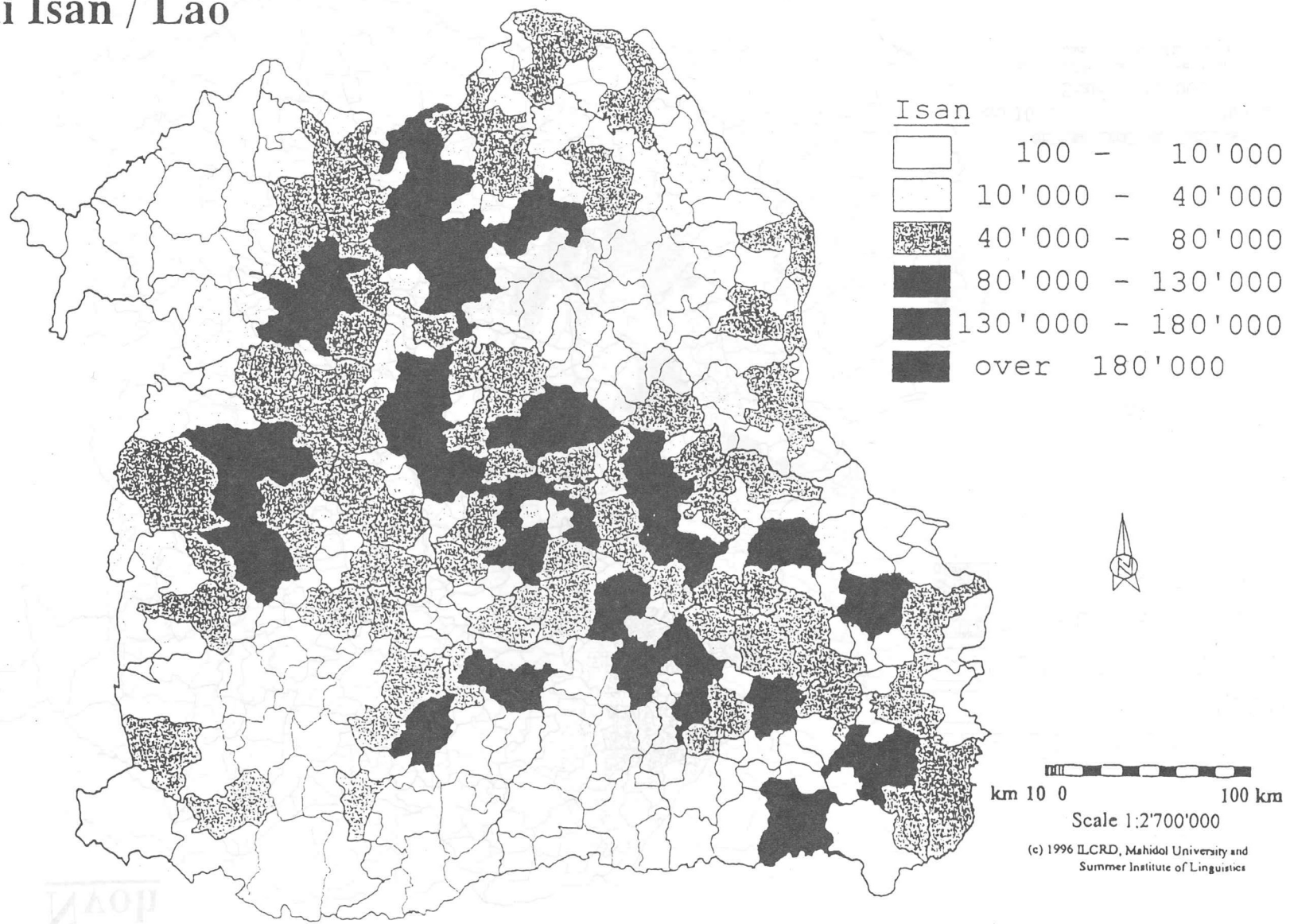
Phu Thai


Phu Thai Speakers
100 - 5'000
5'000 - 15'000
15'000 - 25'000
over - 25'000
N
km 10 0 100 km
Scale 1:2'700'000
(c) 1996 ILCRD. Mahidol University and
Summer Institute of Linguistics

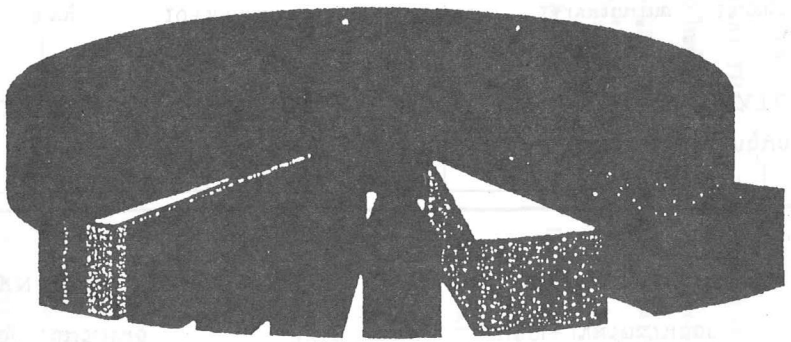
Nyoh


Nyoh Speakers
50 - 2'000
2'000 - 15'000
15'000 - 28'000
over - 28'000
km 10 0
100 km
Scale 1:2'700'000
(c) 1996 ILCRD, Mahidol University and
Summer Institute of Linguistics

Thai Isan / Lao

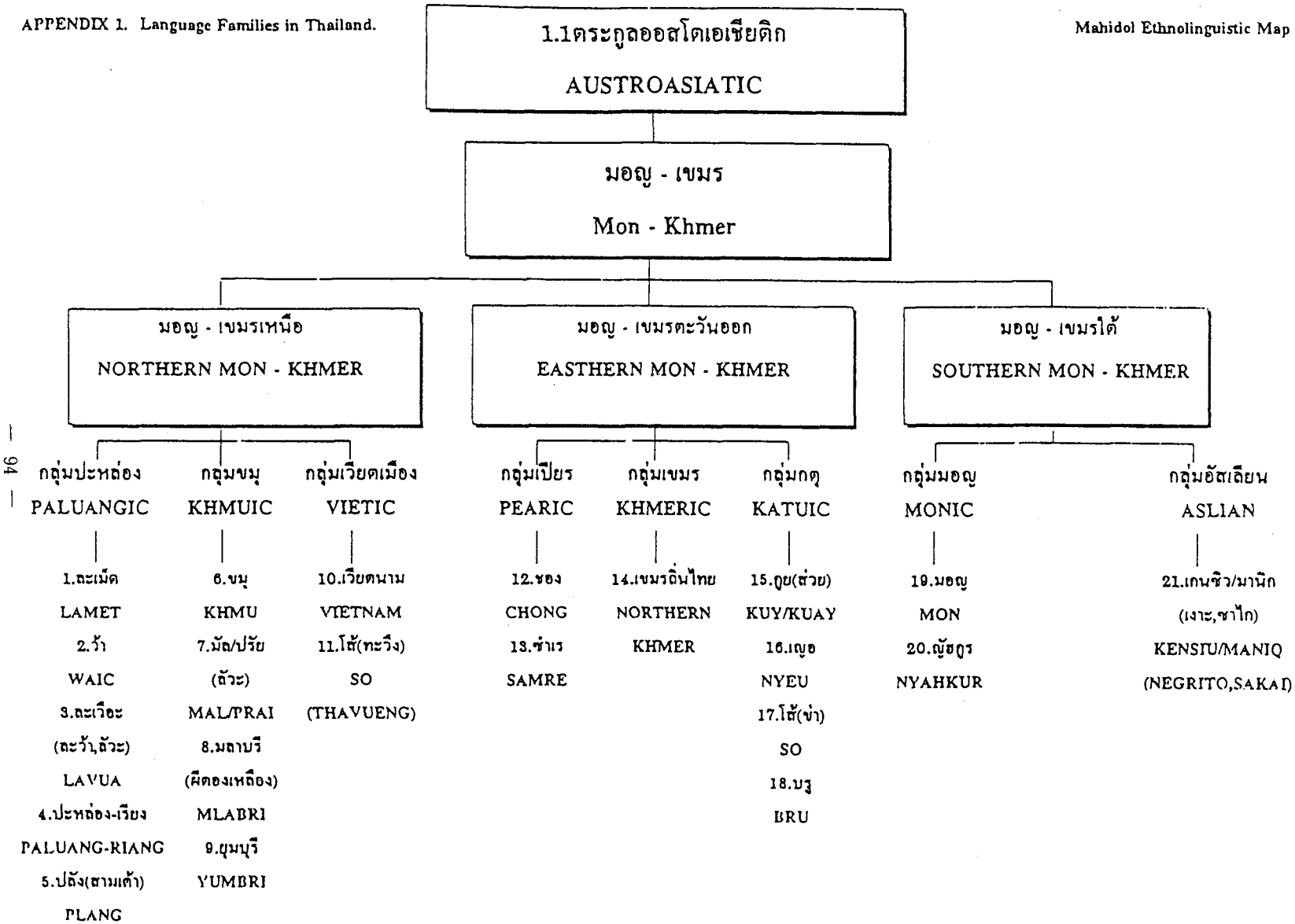


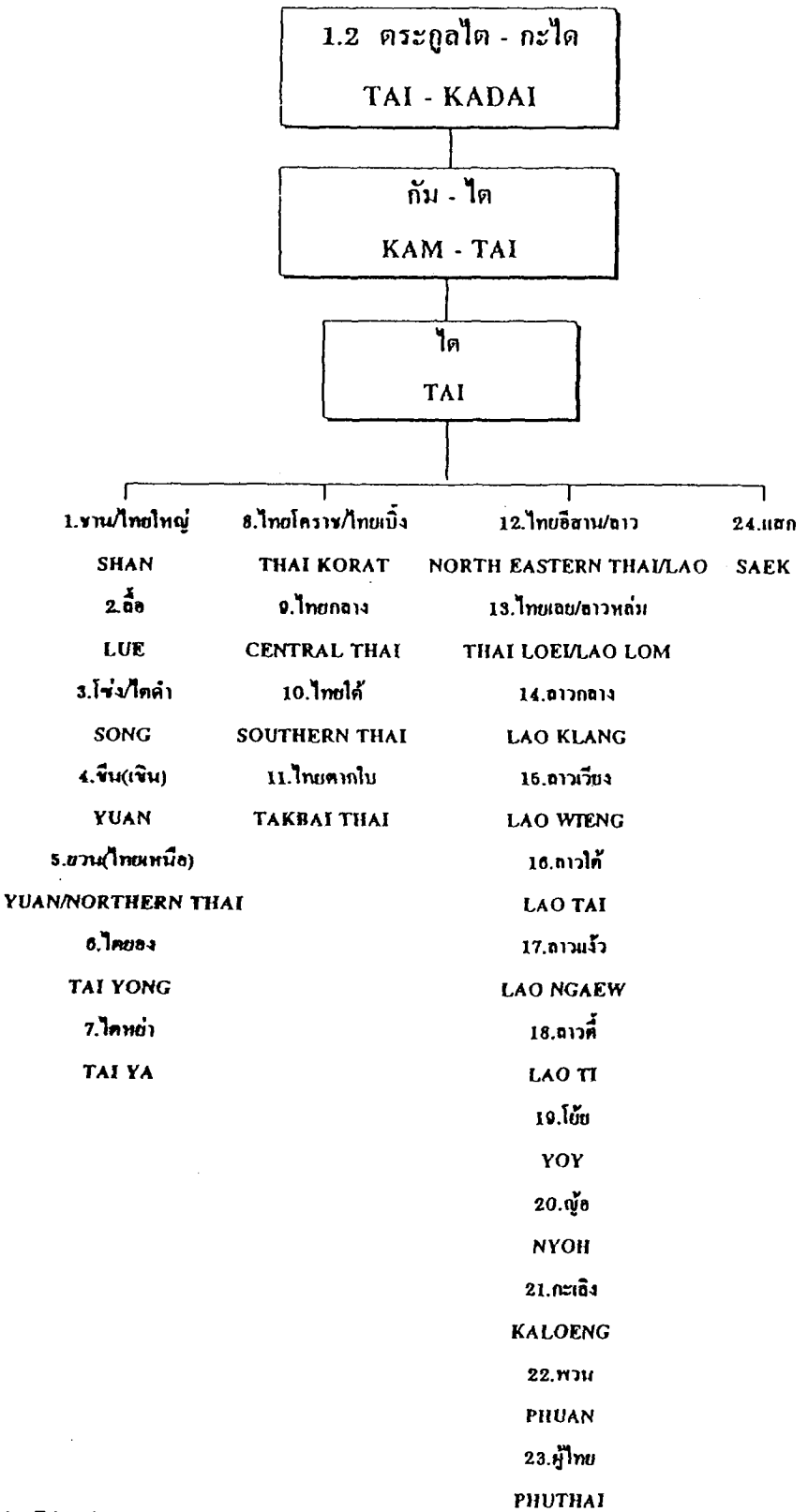
Mahidol Ethnolinguistic Map Project

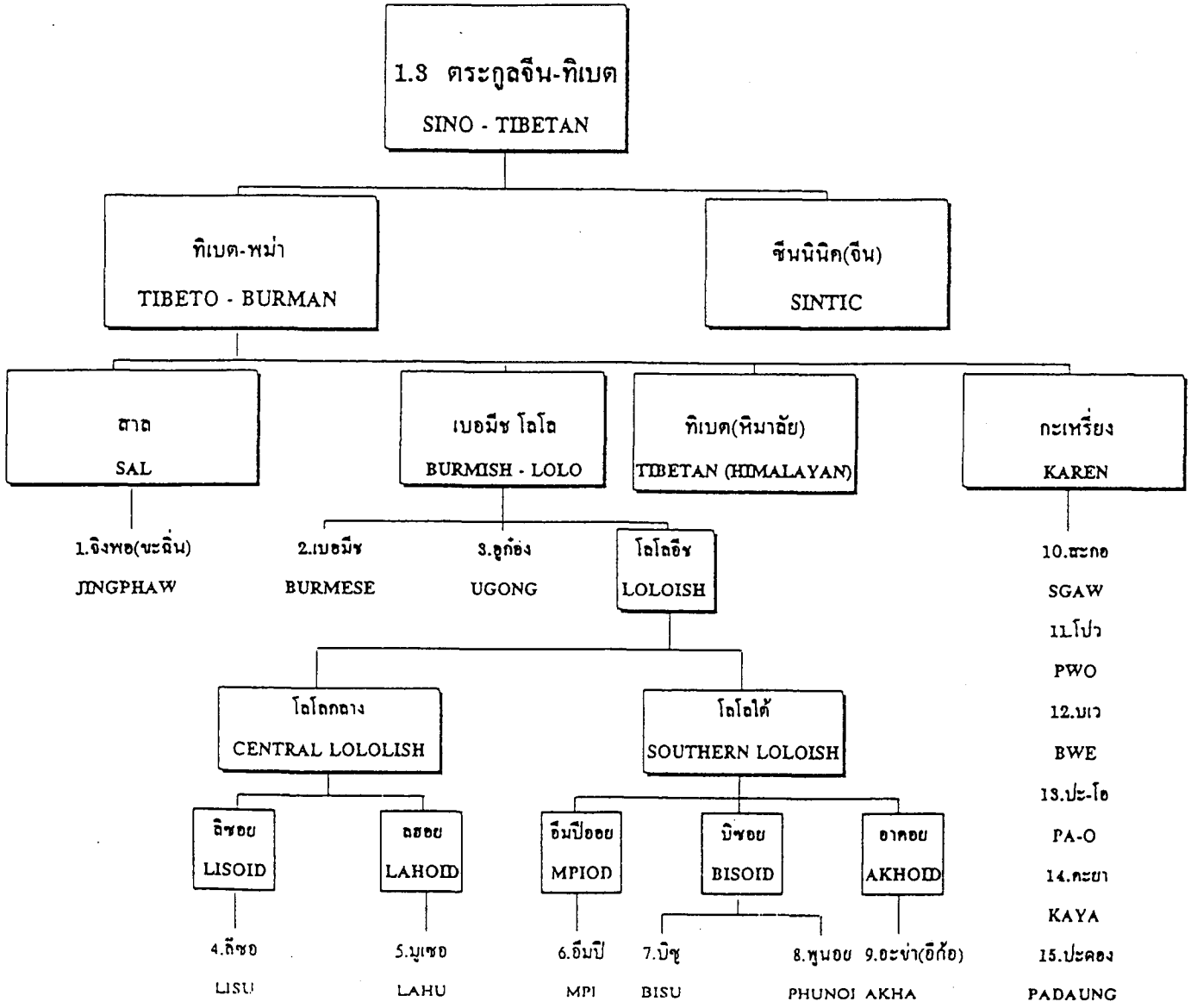


- Ne. Thai/Lao 11135493 = 71.1%
- N. Khmer 1266767 = 8.08%
- Thai Klang 971120 = 6.2%
- Thai Korat 521417 = 3.33%
- Phuthai 457411 = 2.92%
- Kuy 407724 = 2.6%
- Nyoh 406738 = 2.6%
- Thai Loei(Lao Lom) 226459 = 1.45%
- So(Bru) 69967 = 0.45%
- Kaloeng 68431 = 0.44%
- Yooy 52579 = 0.34%
- Phuan 23820 = 0.15%
- Vietnamese 23539 = 0.15%
- Nyeu 16511 = 0.11%
- Nyahkur (Chaobon) 6283 = 0.04%
- C. Khmer 6262 = 0.04%
- Lao (PDR) 4500 = 0.03%
- Saek 3535 = 0.02%
- So (Thavueng) 1565 = 0.01%

Chart 2 Shows the number of speakers and percentage of each Ethnolinguistic group in Northeast Thailand


1.1ตระกูลออสโตเอเชียติก
AUSTROASIATIC
มอญ - เขมร
Mon - Khmer
มอญ - เขมรเหนือ
NORTHERN MON - KHMER
มอญ - เขมรตะวันออก
EASTHERN MON - KHMER
มอญ - เขมรใต้
SOUTHERN MON - KHMER
กลุ่มปะหล่อง
PALUANGIC
กลุ่มขมุ
KHMUIC
กลุ่มเวียตเมือง
VIETIC
กลุ่มเปียร
PEARIC
กลุ่มเขมร
KHMERIC
กลุ่มกตุ
KATUIC
กลุ่มมอญ
MONIC
กลุ่มอัสเลียน
ASLIAN
1.ละเม็ด
LAMET
2.ว้า
WAIC
3.ละเวือะ
(ละว้า,ลัวะ)
LAVUA
4.ปะหล่อง-เรียง
PALUANG-RIANG
5.ปลัง(สามเต้า)
PLANG
6.ขมุ
KHMU
7.มัล/ปรัย
(ลัวะ)
MAL/PRAI
8.มลาบรี
(ผีตองเหลือง)
MLABRI
9.ยุมบุรี
YUMBRI
10.เวียตนาม
VIETNAM
11.โส้(ทะวึง)
SO
(THAVUENG)
12.ชอง
CHONG
13.ซำเร
SAMRE
14.เขมรถิ่นไทย
NORTHERN
KHMER
15.กูย(ส่วย)
KUY/KUAY
16.เญอ
NYEU
17.โส้(ข่า)
SO
18.บรู
BRU
19.มอญ
MON
20.ญัฮกุร
NYAHKUR
21.เกนชิว/มานิก
(เงาะ,ซาไก)
KENSIU/MANIQ
(NEGRITO,SAKAI)


1.2 ตระกูลไต - กะได
TAI - KADAI
กัม - ไต
KAM - TAI
ไต
TAI
1.ขาน/ไทยใหญ่
SHAN
2.ลื้อ
LUE
3.โซ่ง/ไตดำ
SONG
4.ยวน(เงิน)
YUAN
5.ยวน(ไทยเหนือ)
YUAN/NORTHERN THAI
6.ไตยอง
TAI YONG
7.ไตหย่า
TAI YA
8.ไทยโคราช/ไทยเบิ้ง
THAI KORAT
9.ไทยกลาง
CENTRAL THAI
10.ไทยใต้
SOUTHERN THAI
11.ไทยตากใบ
TAKBAI THAI
12.ไทยอีสาน/ลาว
NORTH EASTERN THAI/LAO
13.ไทยเลย/ลาวหล่ม
THAI LOEI/LAO LOM
14.ลาวกลาง
LAO KLANG
15.ลาวเวียง
LAO WIENG
16.ลาวใต้
LAO TAI
17.ลาวแง้ว
LAO NGAEW
18.ลาวตี้
LAO TI
19.โย้ย
YOY
20.ญ้อ
NYOH
21.กะเลิง
KALOENG
22.พวน
PHUAN
23.ผู้ไทย
PHUTHAI
24.แสก
SAEK


1.8 ตระกูลจีน-ทิเบต
SINO - TIBETAN
ทิเบต-พม่า
TIBETO - BURMAN
ซีนนินิค(จีน)
SINTIC
สาล
SAL
เบอมีช โลโล
BURMISH - LOLO
ทิเบต(หิมาลัย)
TIBETAN (HIMALAYAN)
กะเหรี่ยง
KAREN
1.จิงพอ(ขะฉิ่น)
JINGPHAW
2.เบอมีช
BURMESE
3.อูก้อง
UGONG
โลโลอีช
LOLOISH
10.สะกอ
SGAW
11.โปว
PWO
12.บเว
BWE
13.ปะ-โอ
PA-O
14.คะยา
KAYA
15.ปะดอง
PADAUNG
โลโลกลาง
CENTRAL LOLOLISH
โลโลใต้
SOUTHERN LOLOISH
ลิซอย
LISOID
ลาฮอย
LAHOID
อิมปีออย
MPIOD
บิซอย
BISOID
อาคอย
AKHOID
4.ลีซอ
LISU
5.มูเซอ
LAHU
6.อิมปี
MPI
7.บิซู
BISU
8.พูนอย
PHUNOI
9.อะข่า(อีก้อ)
AKHA

1.4 ตระกูลออสโตรนีเซียน

AUSTRONESIAN

1.มะลายู

MALAY/YAWI

2.อุรักละโวย

URAKLAWOY

3.มอเก็น

MOKEN

4.มอเกล็น

MOKLEN

1.5 ตระกูลแม้ว - เย้า

MIAO - YAO

a.k.a HMONG - MIEN

1.แม้วขาว

WHITE MIAO

2.แม้วดำ

BLACK MIAO

3.แม้วลาย

STRIPED MIAO