



ETHNICITY & RELIGION



Distribution of ethno-linguistic families

The Lao PDR is a very culturally diverse country with over fifty different ethnic groups that originated and migrated over the centuries from many different parts of the surrounding region. Today, the Lao population is composed of 49 officially recognized ethnicities. The categorization of the country's many different ethnic groups went through different phases over the past decades. In the late 1950's, the former government categorized the population into three major groups: the Lao Loum (lowlanders), Lao Theung (midlanders), and Lao Soung (highlanders). The aim of this classification was to strengthen national unity after gaining independence from France. The official use of this categorization system ceased following the adoption of the new constitution in 1991, when the Lao population was classified into four different ethno-linguistic families.

The term 'ethno-linguistic' indicates a categorization based on a common ethnicity through self-identification mainly based on language. The four ethno-linguistic families are Lao-Tai (Tai-Kadai), Mon-Khmer (Austro-asiatic), Hmong-Mien (Hmong-Yao, Miao-Yao), and Sino-Tibetan (mostly Tibeto-Burman). The Lao-Tai make up around two thirds of the total population, and predominantly reside in the agriculturally productive lowlands, the main urban areas, the Mekong River corridor and the areas around the Mekong's main tributaries. Rural Lao-Tai people cultivate lowland irrigated paddy rice in flat plains and valleys, while the non-Lao-Tai families predominantly practice subsistence oriented cultivation of upland rice on sloping lands, often intercropped with other products such as maize or cassava.

Map F1 illustrates the distribution of villages by the main ethno-linguistic family per village, represented in different colours. While dark shades indicate villages populated by only one ethno-linguistic family (more than 99% of the population), lighter shades show that the village is made up of one predominant ethno-linguistic family accounting for more than 80% of the population. Lastly, the light grey colour indicates villages where none of the four ethno-linguistic families account for more than 80%, also referred to as ethnically mixed villages.

Spatial patterns in 2015

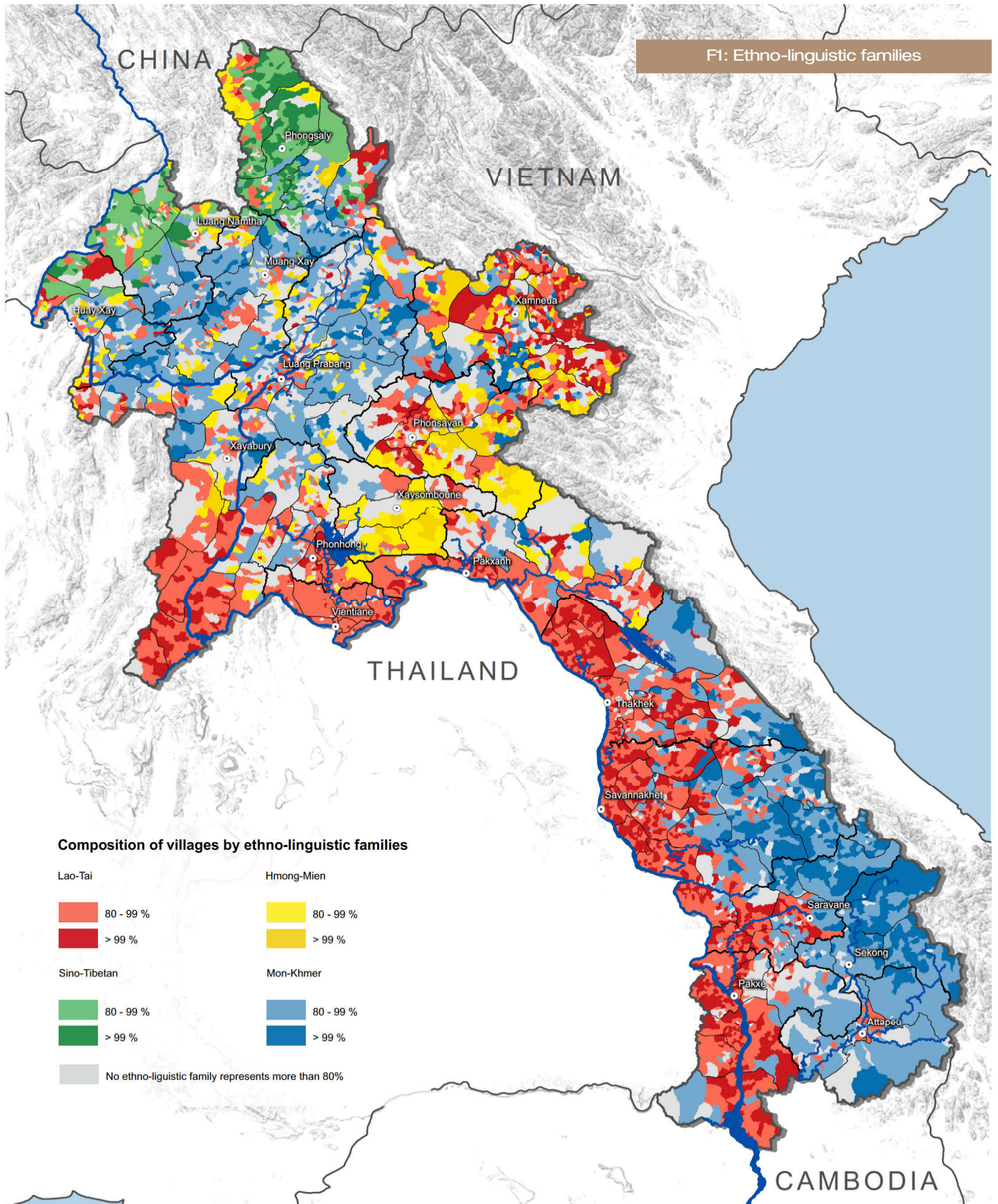
Some distinctive spatial patterns can be recognized. Firstly, it is clearly visible that most of the villages throughout the country are inhabited mostly by people of a single ethno-linguistic family (constituting more than 80% of total village population). Secondly, the north and the south present different patterns of ethno-linguistic composition: the south is dominated by two groups, the Lao-Tai and the Mon-Khmer, while in the centre and in the north, all four ethno-linguistic families are present. Thirdly, villages with diverse ethno-linguistic compositions are mainly concentrated in the centre and the north of the country; in numerous villages in Borikhamxay Province, for instance, no ethno-linguistic family constitutes more than 80% of the village population.

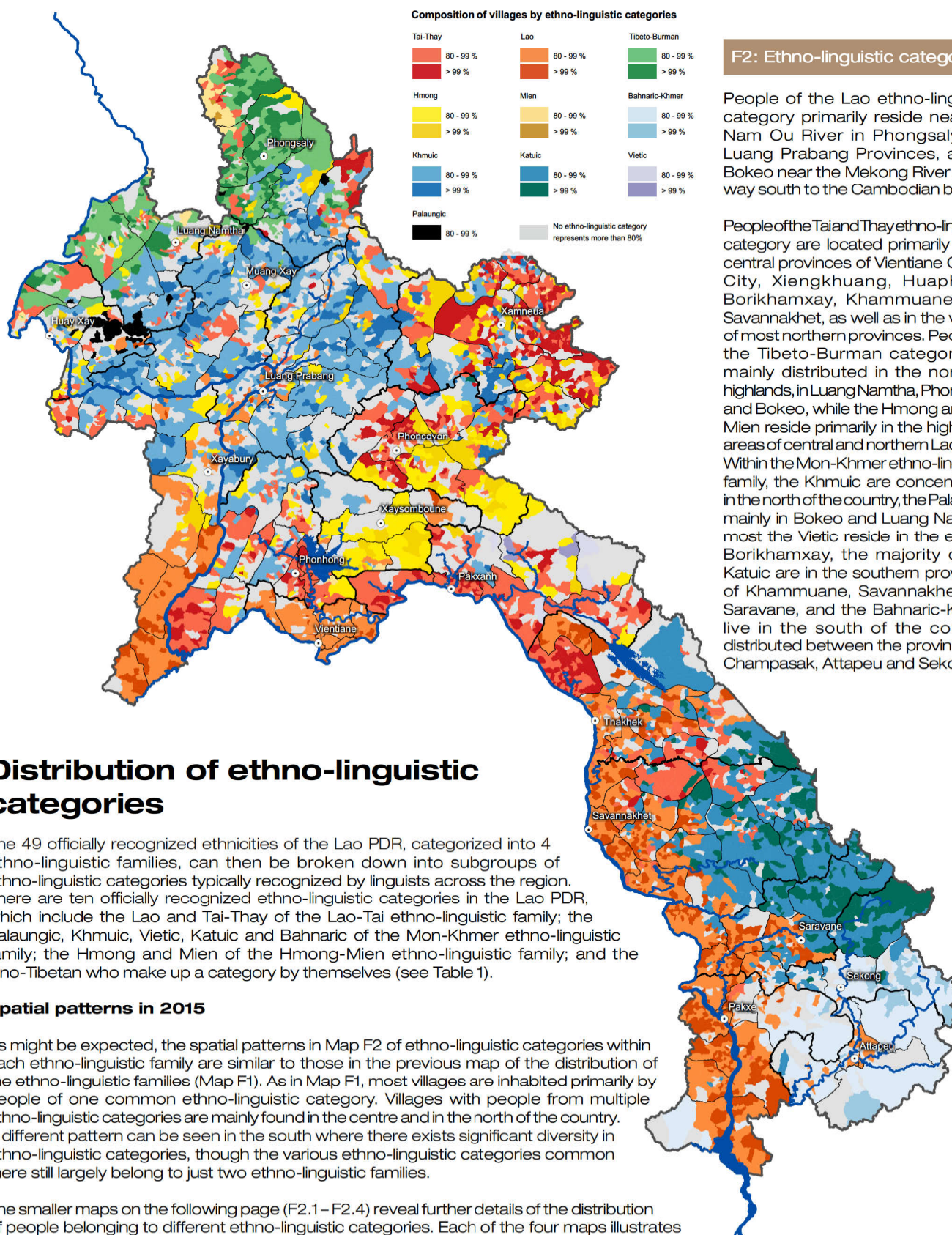
The Lao-Tai family largely dominates the lowlands and the areas in eastern Huaphanh Province; Mon-Khmer live mainly in the mid-land rural areas of the north and the south; Hmong-Mien are found predominantly in the northern uplands, while the Tibeto-Burmans mostly occupy the highlands of the most northern regions in Phongsaly, Luang Namtha and Bokeo Provinces.

Table 1: Grouping of the ethno-linguistic families and categories

Ethno-linguistic families	Ethno-linguistic categories	Ethnic groups
Lao-Tai (Tai-Kadai)	1. Lao	Lao
	2. Tai-Thay	Phou Thay ; Tai; Nyouan; Lue; Yang; Sek; Tai Neua; Lao (in Huaphanh, Xiengkhuang, Borikhamxay, Vientiane Province, Hinboun District in Khammuane)
Mon-Khmer (Austro-asiatic)	3. Khmuic	Khmour; Pray; Ksing Moul (Sing Moun); Phong in Huaphanh, Xiengkhuang, Vientiane Province; Thène; Oe Dou; Kri (Xayabury)
	4. Palaungic	Lamet; Bit; Sam Tao
	5. Katuic	Katang; Makong; Tri; Ta Oy; Katu; Kriang; Souay; Pacoh
	6. Bahnaric-Khmer	Jrou (Laven); Triang; Yè'; Brao; Halak; Oy; Cheng; Sadang; Nya ; Heun; Lavi; Khmer
	7. Vietic	Toum; Ngouan; Meuang; Kri (except in Xayabury); Phong (except Phong assigned to Khmuic);
Sino-Tibetan	8. Tibeto- Burman	Akha; Singily; Lahu; Sla; Hanyi; Lolo; Ho
Hmong-Mien	9. Hmong	Hmong
	10. Mien	Lu Mien

Reproduced from Messerli *et al.*, 2008





F2: Ethno-linguistic categories

People of the Lao ethno-linguistic category primarily reside near the Nam Ou River in Phongsaly and Luang Prabang Provinces, and in Bokeo near the Mekong River all the way south to the Cambodian border.

People of the Tai and Thai ethno-linguistic category are located primarily in the central provinces of Vientiane Capital City, Xiengkhuang, Huaphanh, Borikhamxay, Khammuane, and Savannakhet, as well as in the valleys of most northern provinces. People of the Tibeto-Burman category are mainly distributed in the northern highlands, in Luang Namtha, Phongsaly, and Bokeo, while the Hmong and the Mien reside primarily in the highlands areas of central and northern Lao PDR. Within the Mon-Khmer ethno-linguistic family, the Khmuic are concentrated in the north of the country, the Palaungic mainly in Bokeo and Luang Namtha, most the Vietic reside in the east of Borikhamxay, the majority of the Katuic are in the southern provinces of Khammuane, Savannakhet and Saravane, and the Bahnaric-Khmer live in the south of the country, distributed between the provinces of Champasak, Attapeu and Sekong.

Distribution of ethno-linguistic categories

The 49 officially recognized ethnicities of the Lao PDR, categorized into 4 ethno-linguistic families, can then be broken down into subgroups of ethno-linguistic categories typically recognized by linguists across the region. There are ten officially recognized ethno-linguistic categories in the Lao PDR, which include the Lao and Tai-Thai of the Lao-Tai ethno-linguistic family; the Palaungic, Khmuic, Vietic, Katuic and Bahnaric of the Mon-Khmer ethno-linguistic family; the Hmong and Mien of the Hmong-Mien ethno-linguistic family; and the Sino-Tibetan who make up a category by themselves (see Table 1).

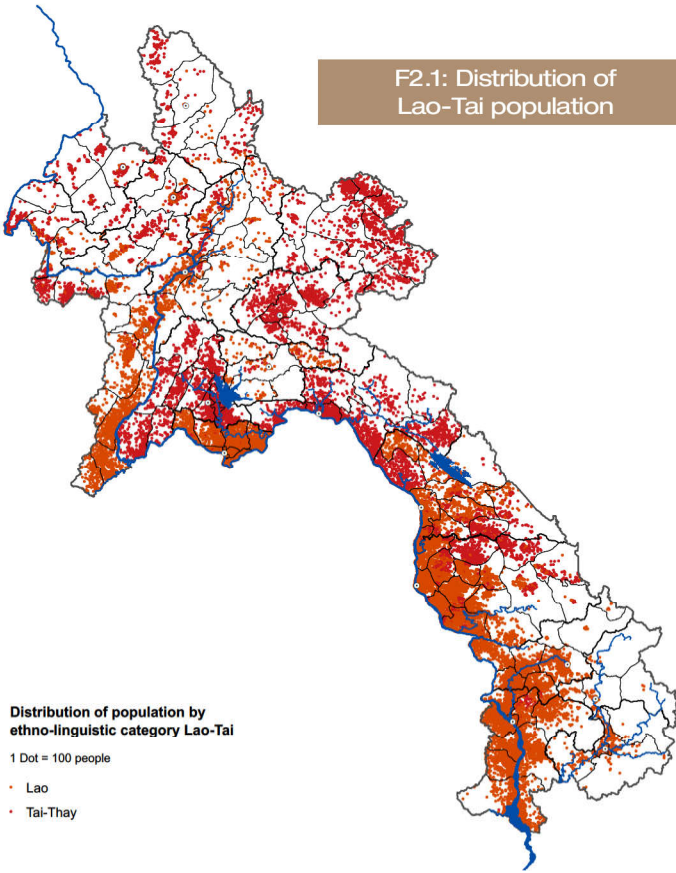
Spatial patterns in 2015

As might be expected, the spatial patterns in Map F2 of ethno-linguistic categories within each ethno-linguistic family are similar to those in the previous map of the distribution of the ethno-linguistic families (Map F1). As in Map F1, most villages are inhabited primarily by people of one common ethno-linguistic category. Villages with people from multiple ethno-linguistic categories are mainly found in the centre and in the north of the country. A different pattern can be seen in the south where there exists significant diversity in ethno-linguistic categories, though the various ethno-linguistic categories common there still largely belong to just two ethno-linguistic families.

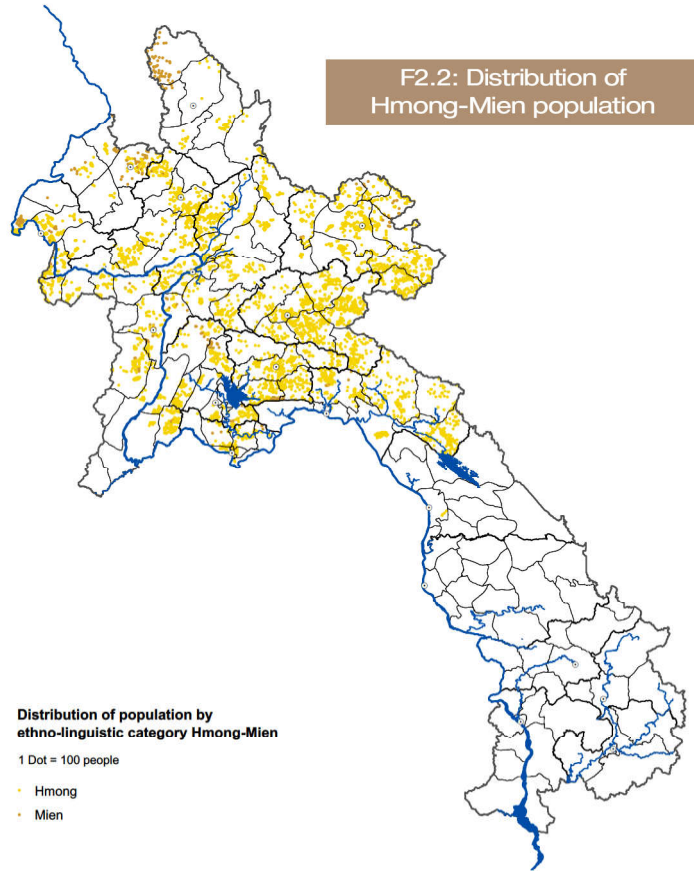
The smaller maps on the following page (F2.1 – F2.4) reveal further details of the distribution of people belonging to different ethno-linguistic categories. Each of the four maps illustrates in detail the distribution of the different ethno-linguistic categories within each family. A dot represents 100 people while the dot's colour indicates the ethno-linguistic category.

Distribution of ethno-linguistic categories

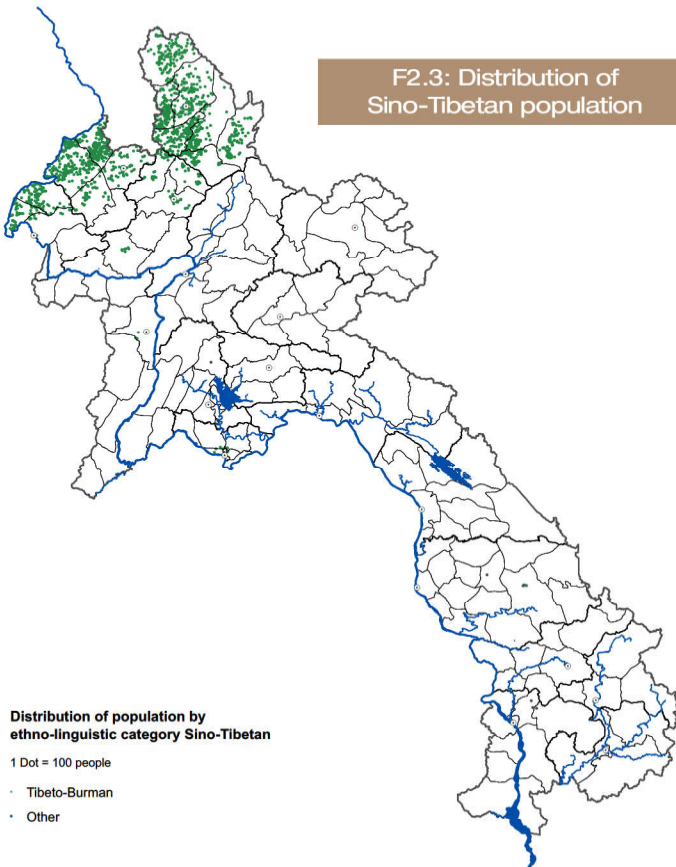
F2.1: Distribution of Lao-Tai population



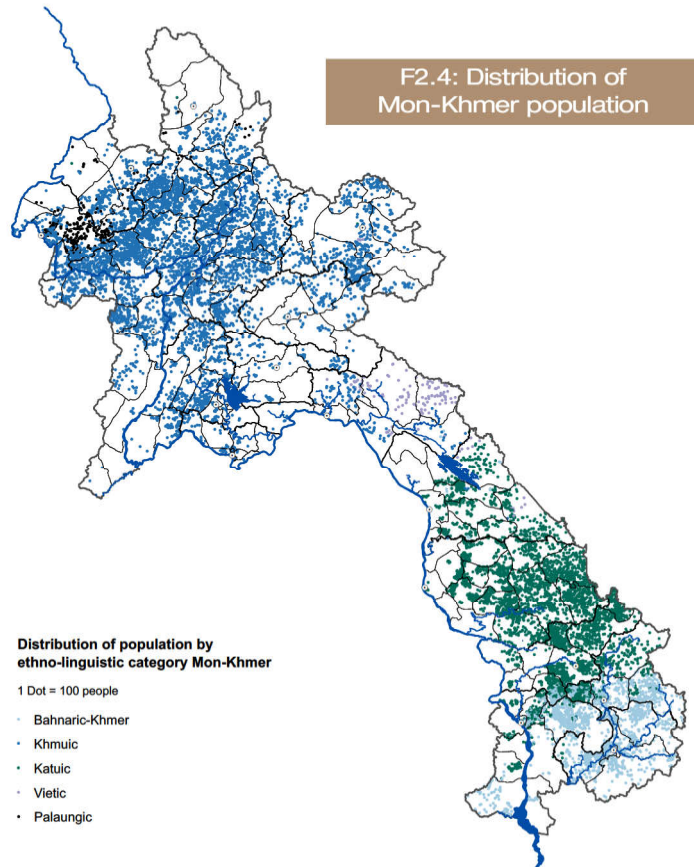
F2.2: Distribution of Hmong-Mien population

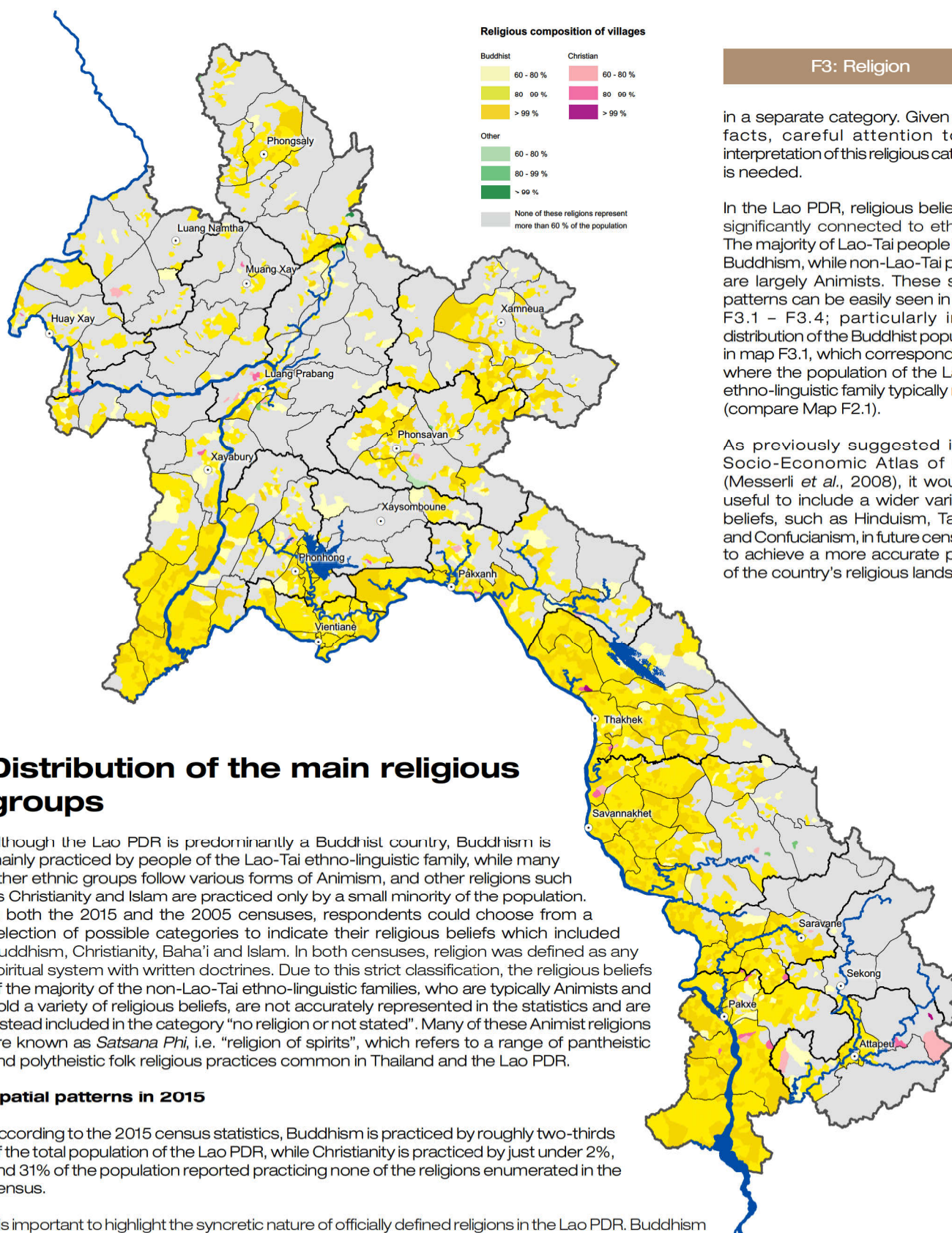


F2.3: Distribution of Sino-Tibetan population



F2.4: Distribution of Mon-Khmer population





F3: Religion

in a separate category. Given these facts, careful attention to the interpretation of this religious category is needed.

In the Lao PDR, religious beliefs are significantly connected to ethnicity. The majority of Lao-Tai people follow Buddhism, while non-Lao-Tai people are largely Animists. These spatial patterns can be easily seen in Maps F3.1 – F3.4; particularly in the distribution of the Buddhist population in map F3.1, which corresponds with where the population of the Lao-Tai ethno-linguistic family typically reside (compare Map F2.1).

As previously suggested in the Socio-Economic Atlas of 2005 (Messerli *et al.*, 2008), it would be useful to include a wider variety of beliefs, such as Hinduism, Taoism, and Confucianism, in future censuses, to achieve a more accurate picture of the country's religious landscape.

Distribution of the main religious groups

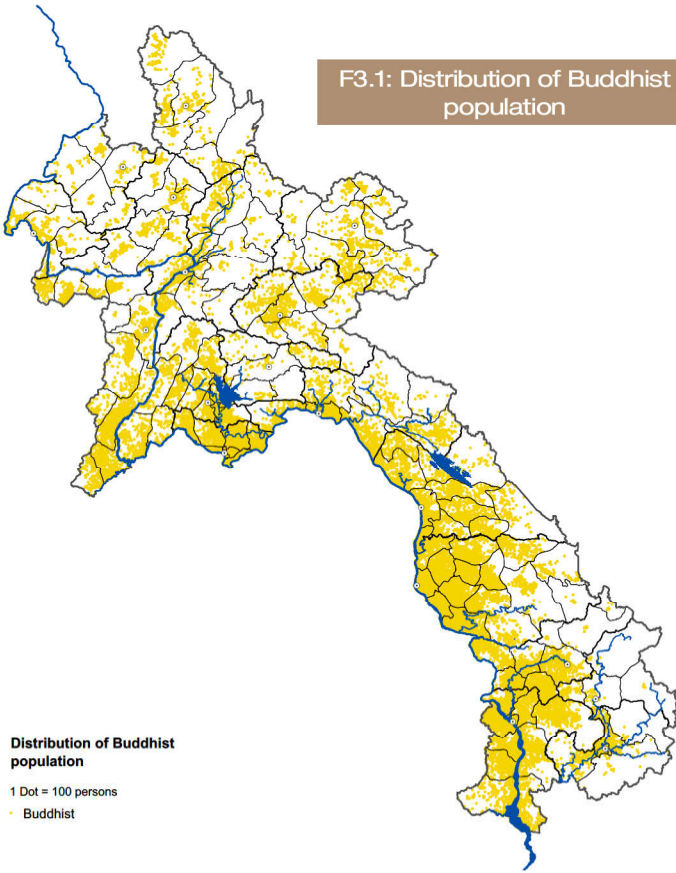
Although the Lao PDR is predominantly a Buddhist country, Buddhism is mainly practiced by people of the Lao-Tai ethno-linguistic family, while many other ethnic groups follow various forms of Animism, and other religions such as Christianity and Islam are practiced only by a small minority of the population. In both the 2015 and the 2005 censuses, respondents could choose from a selection of possible categories to indicate their religious beliefs which included Buddhism, Christianity, Baha'i and Islam. In both censuses, religion was defined as any spiritual system with written doctrines. Due to this strict classification, the religious beliefs of the majority of the non-Lao-Tai ethno-linguistic families, who are typically Animists and hold a variety of religious beliefs, are not accurately represented in the statistics and are instead included in the category "no religion or not stated". Many of these Animist religions are known as *Satsana Phi*, i.e. "religion of spirits", which refers to a range of pantheistic and polytheistic folk religious practices common in Thailand and the Lao PDR.

Spatial patterns in 2015

According to the 2015 census statistics, Buddhism is practiced by roughly two-thirds of the total population of the Lao PDR, while Christianity is practiced by just under 2%, and 31% of the population reported practicing none of the religions enumerated in the census.

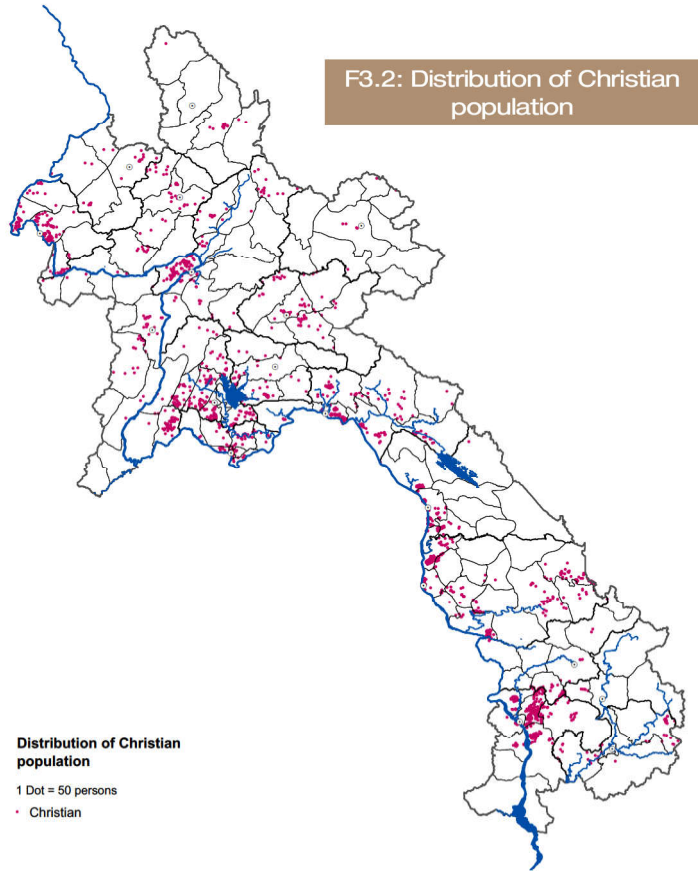
It is important to highlight the syncretic nature of officially defined religions in the Lao PDR. Buddhism in the Lao PDR, for instance, contains elements of Animism and Brahmanism, and is more influenced by Mahayana than Theravada Buddhist doctrine. In certain areas, Catholicism has mixed with Animism, while certain forms of Animism do follow written doctrines and thus should be considered

F3.1: Distribution of Buddhist population



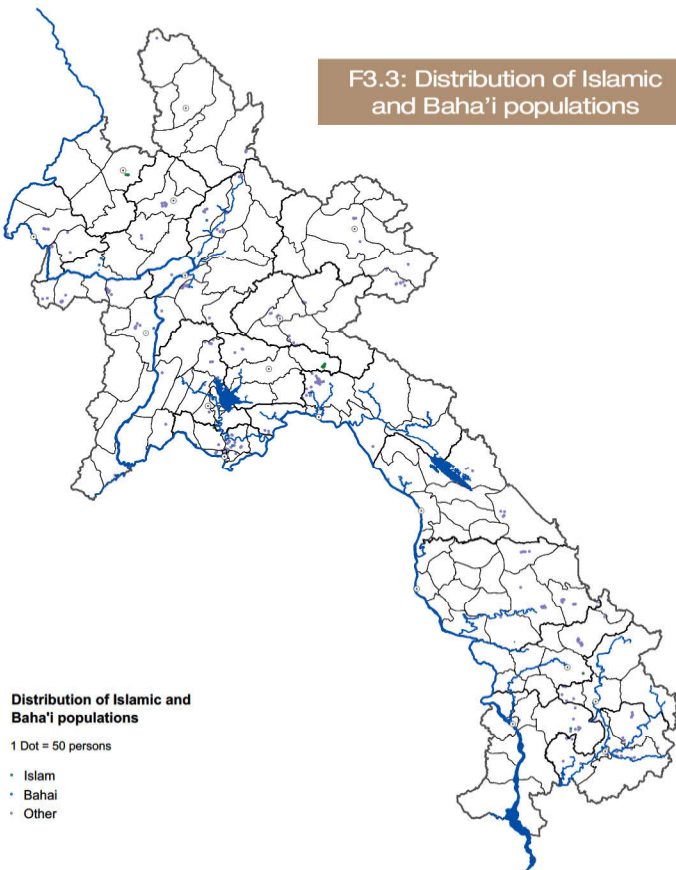
Distribution of Buddhist population
1 Dot = 100 persons
• Buddhist

F3.2: Distribution of Christian population



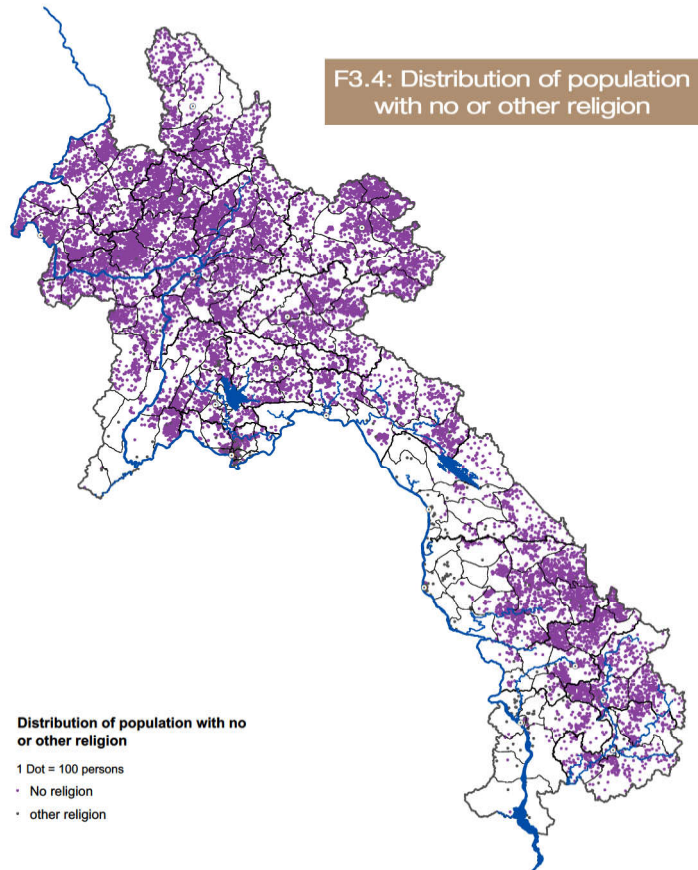
Distribution of Christian population
1 Dot = 50 persons
• Christian

F3.3: Distribution of Islamic and Baha'i populations



Distribution of Islamic and Baha'i populations
1 Dot = 50 persons
• Islam
• Bahai
• Other

F3.4: Distribution of population with no or other religion



Distribution of population with no or other religion
1 Dot = 100 persons
• No religion
• other religion

