

Lao



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| Population | 22,000 |
| Major Religion | Buddhism |
| Language | Lao, Khmer |
| Percent Christian | Less than 1% |
| Bible Translation | Yes |



Who are the Lao?

The Lao like their sister race the Thai/Tai, pushed southward from central China and took over the river valleys in the mountainous area of northern Laos and along the Mekong river as far south as Steung Treng, a northern Cambodian border province. They captured the land vacated by the retreating Cambodians, who had pushed their kingdom as far north as Vientiane, the present day capital of Laos.

In the mid 19th century, the French built major roads along the Mekong River through Cambodia to Saigon, giving access to new markets and agricultural areas.

Over a century ago, the Lao living on the islands in the Mekong where land for wet rice was limited, decided to explore to the south. Thus, the Lao settled along two rivers and today there are numerous villages where Lao is spoken. In spite of attempts to impose fines on the Lao in the 60s for using their mother tongue rather than Khmer, Lao remains their first language and the children start school often not speaking Khmer. During the Khmer Rouge years, some Lao moved back to Laos reinforcing ties with relatives living there. Since roads are improving, many travel to Laos for the big festivals.

What are their lives like?

The Lao live mostly in wooden houses on stilts along river banks, and farm inland alongside the local population. They have herds of buffalo and cows and ox-carts bring the rice sheaves back to the villages for threshing and storing. Fishing and gardening supplement their food. They prefer glutinous rice steamed and put into baskets. The Lao are partial to frogs and snails,

bamboo shoots and leaves found in the forest. They celebrate anything with rice whisky with resulting drunkenness.

For visits to the pagodas and special festivals, the Lao like to wear traditional hand-woven silks, but those in Cambodia do not weave themselves. They have a fairer skin than the Khmer and ethnic minorities. They are striving to maintain their ethnic identity.

What do they believe?

The Lao are Theravada Buddhists and their pagodas in the bigger villages are the hubs of their social activities. Their fear of spirits keeps them in bondage, however, and their houses have altars and miniature temples where offerings are made to appease the spirits. Ancestors are also revered. They tie strings on each other's wrists at many ceremonies like weddings and farewells. These strings signify the keeping of the '*khwan*' spirits within the person for a healthy and successful life. Some festivals, like the New Year (April) and Water festival prior to harvest, go back further than Buddhism to Hindu and animistic elements.

What are their needs?

As education becomes more available to them, they want good jobs in the cities and many young people are moving away. Parents are therefore losing their 'farm hands' and agricultural profits. Spiritually the Lao need liberation from fear of the spirits and all the traditions that go with their religious life, so that they can embrace the good news of Jesus Christ. One group of Christians in Siem Pang has been meeting for eight years; otherwise there are only scattered believers.