



Paul Hattaway

**Location:** With a population of approximately 2,000 speakers, the A'ou ethnic group inhabits three counties in the north central part of Guizhou Province in southern China. They are concentrated in the Longjiazhai District of Zhijin County; in the Shawo, Lannigou, and Xinkaitian districts of Qianxi County; and in and around the town of Pudi in Dafang County.<sup>1</sup> The number of people who identify themselves by the ethnic name A'ou may be substantially higher than the total number who can still speak the language.

**Identity:** Although they have been officially counted as part of the Gelao nationality in China, the A'ou have their own ethnic identity and speak a language not mutually intelligible with any of the other Gelao varieties.

**Language:** A'ou is part of the Kadai branch of the Tai language family. The Gelao languages seem to be a complicated mixture of many different languages. This is shown by a linguistic study which found one Gelao language to have 45% lexical similarity with Southern Zhuang and Dai, 40% with Dong, 36% with Lati, 32% with Pubiao, 29% with Buyang, 27% to 40% with Li, 24% with Northern Zhuang, 22% with Lakkia, 10% to 15% with Hmong, and 5% to 15% with Lu Mien.<sup>2</sup> The reason Gelao is related to so many different widespread languages today may be because it was once the *lingua franca* (common speech) for many peoples. It absorbed characteristics which remain today. Ironically, the Gelao languages are now in danger of extinction as vast

numbers of Gelao have been assimilated by the Han Chinese.

**History:** The ancestors of the A'ou have lived in Guizhou Province since time immemorial. Jacob Lee explains, "Some 2,000 years ago, many tribes lived in this southwestern part of China, each with its own ruler and territory. The Gelao, known in ancient times as the Liao, were one of the largest tribes and they called their country the Yelang Kingdom. During the Han Dynasty (206 BC – AD 220), the imperial court sent armies to conquer the southwest, and then the king of Yelang submitted peacefully by the persuasion of the dispatched ambassadors. Subsequently, most of

the tribal rulers were defeated, leaving only the king of Yelang still in control of his territory."<sup>3</sup>

**Customs:** Most A'ou are hardworking farmers who earn a meager income cultivating rice from the poor Guizhou soil. As a result, many youth have moved to the cities in recent years in search of work.

**Religion:** Most A'ou do not consider themselves religious, although they do honor their ancestors; many elderly people still make sacrifices to various spirits and gods.

**Christianity:** There are no known Christians among the A'ou today. Catholic workers targeted the Gelao in other parts of Guizhou in the late 1800s, but no mission work specifically among the A'ou

has ever been recorded. With a small population and living in a remote location, groups like the A'ou are often overlooked when Christian ministries plan their evangelism and church-planting strategies.



**Population in China:**  
 1,500 (1987)  
 2,060 (2000)  
 2,650 (2010)  
**Location:** Guizhou  
**Religion:** Ancestor Worship  
**Christians:** None Known

## Overview of the A'ou

**Countries:** China  
**Pronunciation:** "Ah-ow"  
**Other Names:** A'ou Gelao  
**Population Source:**  
 1,500 (1987 Zheng Guo-qiao);  
 Out of a total Gelao population of  
 437,997 (1990 census)  
**Location:** *Guizhou:* Zhijin, Qianxi,  
 and Dafang counties  
**Status:** Officially included  
 under Gelao  
**Language:** Daic, Kadai, Lati-Kelao  
**Dialects:** 0  
**Religion:** Ancestor Worship,  
 Animism, No Religion  
**Christians:** None known  
**Scripture:** None  
**Jesus film:** None  
**Gospel Recordings:** None  
**Christian Broadcasting:** None  
**ROPAL code:** KKF02

