

Location: Linguist Jerold A. Edmonson estimated a 1992 population of “2,000 to 3,000” Bela in China.¹ Some Bela may also be located across the border in the northern part of Myanmar. Situated near China’s western border with Myanmar, the Bela live in Luxi, Yingjiang, and Lianghe counties in Dehong Prefecture — especially Santaishan Township in Luxi County.² The Bela live among verdant hills in an area that is experiencing an economic boom because of cross-border trade with Myanmar.

Identity: The Bela have been officially included as part of the Jingpo nationality in China. They wear Jingpo clothing and live among the Jingpo yet consider themselves to be a distinct people. The Bela also speak their own language. According to one researcher, Bela may have been the name used prior to 1949, but the people now call themselves *Laku*.³

Language: There are four tones in the Bela language, which is a member of the Yi (Lolo) branch of the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family. Bela is unintelligible with other Jingpo languages and contains loanwords from Chinese, Burmese, Jingpo, and Tai Mao. Bela is not a written language, although the various Jingpo groups have a tale about a script that long ago was given to their ancestors by the *Great Spirit*. It was written on leaves. One day the leaves got wet and were spread out in the sun to dry. When the people were not watching, a buffalo came and ate it. Ever since

that time they have been without the Word of God.⁴

History: A large number of people moved into the Dehong area in the sixteenth century, followed by an influx of refugees in 1885 when the British army launched a campaign in the north of Burma.⁵ In the past, the Bela were part of a slave system headed by hereditary nobles called *shanguan*. The slaves were not permitted any personal freedom and were forced to work. Slaves were given the family name of their masters. Some managed to escape and formed their own communities in the remote mountains.

Customs: The Bela area is abundant in wild herbs, rubber, tea, coffee, and cotton crops. Most Bela homes are two-level bamboo structures. Bela men were traditionally great hunters when the now extinct leopards, bears, and tigers roamed the forests. The Bela are hard-working agriculturists, usually found tending their long-grain rice fields.



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Religion: Although most Bela are aware of the gospel of Christ through the witness of the many strong churches among the neighboring Maru, Lashi, and Jingpo communities, the majority of Bela remain polytheists and animists.

Christianity: In 1986 there were 3,549 baptized Jingpo Christians reported in Dehong, meeting in 71 churches.⁶ Approximately 500 of these believers are Bela. J. N. Cushing, in 1876, was the first missionary to work in the China-Myanmar border area. By the time all foreigners were expelled from China in the early 1950s there were numerous churches, medical clinics, and orphanages in the region.



Population in China:
 3,000 (1992)
 3,700 (2000)
 4,760 (2010)
Location: Yunnan
Religion: Animism
Christians: 500

Overview of the Bela

Countries: China, possibly Myanmar
Pronunciation: “Bay-la”
Other Names: Pela, Pala, Bola, Polo, Bula, Laku, Pola
Population Source: 2,000 to 3,000 (1992 J. Edmonson); Out of a total Jingpo population of 119,209 (1990 census)
Location: *W Yunnan:* Santaishan Town of Luxi County in Dehong Prefecture; Also in Yingjiang and Lianghe counties

Status: Officially included under Jingpo
Language: Sino-Tibetan, Tibeto-Burman, Burmese-Lolo, Lolo, Unclassified
Dialects: 0
Religion: Animism, Polytheism, Christianity
Christians: 500
Scripture: None
Jesus film: None
Gospel Recordings: None
Christian Broadcasting: None
ROPAL code: BEQ00

