

GELAO

More than 1,500 Gelao people live in northern Vietnam close to the Chinese border. They inhabit two non-contiguous districts, Dong Van and Hoang Su Phi, in Ha Giang Province. In the Dong Van District, arable land is in short supply and there are few streams or rivers to help irrigate the land. The Gelao there grow crops on burnt-over land and between rocks. In Hoang Su Phi District on the other hand, the mountains contain lush vegetation even at relatively high altitudes, and water is abundant. The Gelao in Hoang Su Phi cultivate rice in submerged paddy fields. In Vietnam the Gelao are officially called *Co Lao*.

In China 438,000 Gelao were counted in the 1990 national census, scattered throughout 20 counties and six

provinces of southern China. Despite their high population, most Gelao in China have been assimilated to Han Chinese culture and language. Today only about 25,000 elderly Gelao are still able to speak their mother tongue.⁹ Indeed Gelao culture and ethnicity is now better displayed among the Gelao in Vietnam, where the women continue to wear their traditional dress.

The name *Gelao* means 'bamboo' as well as 'human beings'. The ancestors of the Gelao are believed to have been a part of the ancient Liao race who established the Yelang Kingdom in Guizhou, China, more than 2,000 years ago. A folk-tale tells how the King of Yelang was born from bamboo, so the whole group came to

be called 'bamboo' (*Gelao*).

Until earlier this century, the Gelao practiced initiation rites for their young men, "including tooth-breaking and hair-cutting rituals. The Gelao were once head-hunters and cannibals."¹¹

The exact date of the Gelao's arrival in Vietnam is uncertain, but their stories do recount how they were driven out of China and into exile. Their migration occurred probably about 200 years ago. One writer has said, "Arriving in Vietnam as exiles, they felt the need to unite and assist one another in building a new life. This spirit of solidarity put an end to the process of social differentiation. In each village, despite some discrepancy in income and living standards, inequality is not marked and arises mainly from the amount of work done by each family."¹²

When a Gelao woman gives birth, the placenta is burned and then placed into a hole in a rock within the forest so that dogs and pigs do not trample on it. The Gelao believe if a placenta is lost the spirits of their ancestors will not be able to identify the person as a Gelao when they die.



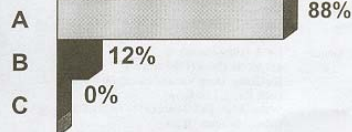
Population:
1,473 (1989)
1,830 (2000)
2,230 (2010)

Language:
Tai

Religion:
Polytheism

Christians:
none known

Status of Evangelization (Awareness of Christ and the Gospel)



A = have never heard the Gospel or the name of Christ
B = were evangelized but have not yet become Christians
C = Adherents to any form of Christianity

After a burial, rocks are placed in a circular pattern around the grave. Each circle corresponds to each 10 years of age the deceased was. A 70-year old person, therefore, would have seven circles of rocks, which are then covered up with dirt.

Among the Gelao in Vietnam there are three distinct subgroups—the Red Gelao, White Gelao and Green Gelao—who each speak a different dialect. The Gelao language is part of the so-called *Kadai* language family. The term was coined by a linguist and is a generic term meaning *ka* (the classifier for people), and *dai* (the name for the Tai peoples as a whole). In Vietnam the Red Gelao subgroup are shifting to Mandarin, and few people are able to understand their mother tongue.

The religious beliefs of the Gelao are a mixture of ancestor worship, animism and polytheism. They worship the spirit of the rice paddy, the spirit of burnt-over land, and the spirit that protects their domesticated animals. The spirit of the terraced rice fields is represented by a strange stone that is placed on a hill overlooking the field. Offerings and sacrifices are made at appointed intervals and at annual ceremonies.

Ancestors going back 3-4 generations are allowed to be worshipped. Gelao religious ceremonies are scheduled for the 3rd day of each lunar month, the 5th day of the 5th month, the 15th day of the 7th month, and the 9th day of the 9th month.

There are no known Christians among the Gelao in Vietnam. Few are aware of the Name of Jesus Christ. Ha Giang Province, where the Gelao live, has few Christians among any people group. Scripture portions were translated into Gelao by missionaries in China in 1937, but the script is now obsolete and the booklets are out of print.



Pray for the Gelao

- 1 Pray the Lord would raise up laborers to take the Gospel to the Gelao in Vietnam for the first time in their history. Ask God to soften the hearts of the Gelao to seek for the Truth.
- 2 Ask God to reveal His love and grace to the Gelao people, that many might gain a clear understanding of the Way of Salvation.
- 3 Pray there would soon be a worshipping Christian church of redeemed Gelao people in northern Vietnam.

Overview of the Gelao

Countries	: China, Vietnam	Subgroups (3)	: Co Lao Do (Red Gelao), Co Lao Trang (White Gelao), Co Lao Xanh (Green Gelao)
Pronunciation	: "Geh-law"	Religion	: Polytheism, Ancestor Worship, Daoism
Other Names	: Thu, Co Lao, Kelao, Keleo, Keh-lao, Gelo, Chilao, Lao, lao, Quo Lao, Cao Lao, Thi, Thai	Christians	: none known
Population Source	: 1,473 (1989 census); 437,997 in China (1990 census)	Scripture	: Portions 1937
Location	: Ha Giang, Dong Van and Hoang Su Phi districts	Jesus film	: none
Language	: Dale, Kadai, Lati-Kelao	Gospel Recordings	: none
Dialects (5)	: White Gelao, Red Gelao, Green Gelao, Cape Draping Gelao, Mountain Gelao	Christian Radio	: none
		ROPAL code	: KKF00