

LAO

More than 11,000 members of the Lao minority live in three provinces of northwest Vietnam. Lao communities are located in the Dien Bien and Phong Tho districts of Lai Chau Province, the Song Ma District of Son Ha Province and the Than Uyen District of Lao Cai Province.

It is important to note that the members of the Lao minority in Vietnam are not the same ethnic group, nor do they speak the same language as the Lao people of Laos. The Lao minority speak a Central Tai language related to Thai and Tay.

Wherever the Lao have settled they have taken on many of the customs of their neighbors. Those living near Dien

Bien for example, now wear clothing identical to the Khmu. Lao in other areas dress like their Black Thai neighbors.

Lao houses are built on stilts. The roof is shaped like a tortoise shell, and is raised at both ends. The principle column in the house is considered sacred by the Lao. Decorations are hung on it and visitors are not allowed to touch it. A hearth is situated in front of it where the daily meals are prepared. The Lao believe a spirit actually lives inside the wooden column.

For centuries the Lao observed the custom of tattooing their bodies. Only in recent years has this custom started to fade. Lao women traditionally

tattooed the palms of their hands with pictures of insects or plants. The men tattooed their wrists with Buddhist swastikas (considered a sign of peace in Buddhism) and tattooed their thighs with images of animals. Today many Lao still have tattoos, but the practice has lost favor with the current generation of Lao youth.

The Lao are part of what was probably once a single, great Tai race. After two thousand years of migration, Tai-speaking peoples are found from northeast India to southern China, including such peoples as the Dai and Zhuang of China, the Shan of Myanmar, the Lao of Laos and of course the Thai of Thailand.

Lao women are skilled weavers and embroiders. They make their own colorful patterns and designs. Many traditional motifs of their particular clan are sewn into their dresses.

The Lao possess an ancient script, which today is primarily used by Buddhist monks and shamans. They have centuries-old books, called *khap*, which are made from palm leaves. These books record Lao legends, songs and poems. Their existence is well known throughout the region.



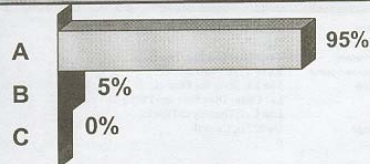
Population:
9,614 (1989)
11,940 (2000)
14,550 (2010)

Language:
Tai

Religion:
Shamanism

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

The books appear in many museums and cultural exhibitions.

If you ask a Lao what religion they follow, they invariably respond by saying "Buddhism." In reality, however, their faith in Theravada Buddhism is merely a small part of their overall religious world-view. It has been added on to the prevailing belief in the spirit world, which existed for numerous generations before the arrival of Buddhism in the area around the 13th or 14th centuries.

The most powerful figures in Lao society are the shamans, or witch-doctors. Most Lao villages have a resident shaman, called *mo-lam* in the Lao language. His job is not only to preside over religious ceremonies, but he is also the community leader, peacemaker, medical doctor and teacher. The shaman is usually the most highly respected person in the village.

Buddhist pagodas do exist in Lao villages. Instead of being a central point for the discussion and teaching of Buddhist principles, however, the pagodas have become places for the Lao to offer fruit and flowers to the evil spirits they believe control every aspect of their lives. Offering ceremonies take place on the 15th and 30th days of each lunar month.

The Lao are extremely superstitious. They wear amulets and lucky charms around their wrists and ankles in a bid to ward off sickness and ill-fortune.

Trapped by their choking fear of death and of evil spirits, few Lao have ever heard the Gospel. They are a completely unevangelized and unreached people group with no Gospel witness and no Scriptures in their language. The nearest Christian community is probably among the Black Thai in Dien Bien Phu.



Pray for the Lao

- 1 Pray against the powerful spirits of fear, superstition and worship of demons that have kept the Lao bound in spiritual darkness for centuries.
- 2 Ask God to give the Black Thai Christians the responsibility and means to take the Gospel to the linguistically-similar Lao people in Vietnam.
- 3 Pray for the first time many Lao would soon have the chance to hear what Jesus Christ has done for them at Calvary.

Overview of the Lao

Countries : Vietnam
Pronunciation : "Lao"
Other Names : Tay'oi Lao, Lao Boe, Lao Noi
Population Source : 9,614 (1989 census)
Location : Son La: Song Ma District;
Lai Chau: Dien Bien and Phong Tho districts;
Lao Cai: Than Uyen District
Language : Daiic, Tai, Central
Dialects : 0

Subgroups (2) : Lao Boe, Lao Noi
Religion : Shamanism, Theravada Buddhism, Animism, Ancestor Worship
Christians : none known
Scripture : none
Jesus film : none
Gospel Recordings : none
Christian Radio : none
ROPAL code : TSL00