

# PHULA

More than 7,000 Phula people live in four provinces of northwest Vietnam. Although they have been granted status as a minority group as a whole, the Phula divide into seven distinct subgroups, some or all of which may qualify as separate ethno-linguistic entities. Each subgroup wears a different style of traditional dress and observes slightly different customs.

Little linguistic research has been conducted into the Phula language, although it is believed to be part of the Southern Yi linguistic branch. Researchers often get confused by this group because *Phula* is also an alternate name for the Lati minority who speak an unrelated Tai language.

*Pula* people in Yuanjiang, Honghe and Shiping counties in Yunnan Province. In China they are one of numerous subgroups of the Yi nationality. The Phula are believed to have arrived in Vietnam very long ago. Vietnamese writer Le Quy Don, famous for his book written in the mid-1700s, *Kien Van Tieu Luc* ("Things Seen and Heard"), described the Phula as already being settled in northern Vietnam. He used the name *Pho* to describe them, which is still used by one of the Phula subgroups.

In the districts of Bac Ha in Lao Cai Province, the Phula live in small villages alongside the Hmong, Yao and Han Chinese.

prefer to build their homes on stilts, while the *Phula Han* (who mostly live in Bac Ha, Muong Khuong and Xi Ma Cai districts of Lao Cai Province) build their homes flat on the ground.

In every Phula home the most sacred room is a central bay which contains the ancestral altar. Next to the altar is a tiny "spirit door" about 10 inches wide. It is never touched or opened except during appointed times of ancestral worship.

The dress of the Phula is spectacular, but varies from one subgroup to another. The *Xa Pho* and *Phula Hoa* wear "low-necked square-shaped vests put on over the head and reaching to the waist. The decorative motifs (triangles, squares, juxtaposed diamonds or pine-trees, harrow teeth, swastikas and stylized human beings) cover the lower half of both front and back, while crowns made of glass beads are sewn to the upper half. The two sleeves are made of bands... decorated with 30-40 shells attached in a straight line around the waist."<sup>10</sup>

Marriage among the Phula can be in some ways simple, yet also very complicated. The easy part is the union itself. A young Phula man can

simply move in with a girlfriend, and they are considered married. The couple informs their parents and a feast is held where the approval is given. Marriage between members of the same lineage is allowed, but they must come from different branches of the lineage.

The actual wedding ceremony however, may not take place for a few years. If the man comes from a poor family it may take them some time to generate enough wealth to provide for the girl's dowry. The dowry includes items for the new couple such as knives, axes, seeds, pigs, chickens, blankets and cooking pots. The family of the bridegroom must also provide gifts for the family of the bride. This is seen as a way of paying back some of the expenses that were incurred in the upbringing of the girl. Gifts to the family may include new clothes, silver necklaces, and a large amount of meat and alcohol.

The Phula language has only recently gained the interest of scholars. So far they have ascertained it is Tibeto-Burman in nature, but have not determined its branch affiliations. Phula is probably related to the Yi and Hani languages of Yunnan Province, China.

The predominant religion among the Phula is ancestor worship mixed with animism. When a person dies, the corpse is left in the house for two or three days while the relatives come to offer their respect and condolences. Items of salted meat and drink are placed in the grave, so that the soul of the deceased will not go hungry on its journey to the afterlife.

There are only a handful of known Christians among the Phula. Some Christian organizations have expressed interest in working with one or two of the subgroups, and some community aid has been given to the *Xa Pho* group who number about 300 people.



## Pray for the Phula

- 1 Pray that linguists and anthropologists would soon study the Phula in depth, so that understanding of this hidden people can grow, and Christians can use the information to reach them.
- 2 Pray a strong church would soon be established among all seven subgroups of the Phula. Ask God to send evangelists and church planters specifically to the Phula.
- 3 Ask God to save the Phula, that there may be representatives from this small tribe glorifying Jesus Christ.

A 1980 Chinese study listed 4,200 The *Phula Hoa* and *Xa Pho* subgroups



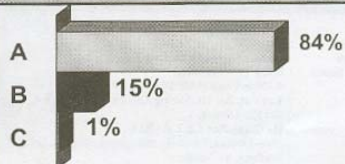
**Population:**  
6,424 (1989)  
7,980 (2000)  
9,730 (2010)

**Language:**  
Sino-Tibetan

**Religion:**  
Ancestor Worship

**Christians:**  
10

## 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

## Overview of the Phula

Countries	: Vietnam, China
Pronunciation	: "Fuo-lah"
Other Names	: Bo Kho Pa, Mu Di Fa, Pula
Population Source	: 6,424 (1989 census); 4,200 in China (1980 Di Ming Zhi)
Location	: Lao Cai: Bac Ha, Muong Khuong, Xi Ma Cai and Bat Xat districts; Ha Giang, Son La, Lai Chau
Language	: Sino-Tibetan, Tibeto-Burman, Burmese-Lolo, Lolo, Northern, Yi, Southern
Dialects	: 0

Subgroups (7)	: Phula Han, Xa Pho, Phula Hoa, Phula Den (Black Phula), Phula Trang (White Phula), Chu La Phula, Bo Kho Pa
Religion	: Ancestor Worship, Animism, Polytheism, Christianity
Christians	: 10
Scripture	: none
Jesus film	: none
Gospel Recordings	: none
Christian Radio	: none
ROPAL code	: none