

SILA

Approximately 700 members of the Sila minority group live within Vietnam's borders. The majority of Sila live in Laos, where more than 19,000 inhabit Phongsalay Province. The Sila in Vietnam say they are the descendants of seven families who fled Laos about 150 years ago to escape oppression from the Lao rulers.

The lives of the Sila are very hard. The region they inhabit (the three villages of Seo Hay, Si Thau Chai and Nam Xin) are situated in the Muong Te District of Lai Chau Province in the extreme northwest of Vietnam. The area is impoverished and largely cut off from the rest of the world. Diseases such as malaria and goiters abound among the Sila, who have a life expectancy of only about 40 years.

The Sila are changing from being slash-and-burn agriculturists to having more settled communities on the banks of the Da River. In the past, the Sila lived on mountain-slopes and moved every 10-20 years after they had exhausted the soil of all its nutrients. Today many Sila tend to irrigated rice fields. They also grow corn.

Hunting and gathering are important facets of the Sila diet. Women are skilled at foraging for mushrooms, vegetables and bamboo shoots in the forest. Both of the Sila clans, the *Hu* and *Po*, strictly forbid the eating of cats. The cat is their primary totem. The *Po* clan, however, are allowed to eat tiger meat if they choose to do so.

Sila houses contain four rooms. The ancestral altar is the most important part of the home and is never located near the entrance way. A hearth, situated in the middle of the house, is constructed of three stones. The Sila believe these stones to be the dwelling place of the souls of their ancestors.

Sila women have spectacular and unique costumes. Dozens of silver and tin coins are attached to the front of their shirts. The Sila wear different headdress depending on the woman's age and marital status. Young girls wear a hat or turban, while married women wear a different style that immediately reveals their married status. The Sila never go out without taking a shoulder-bag that has red tassels hanging from it. In the past, Sila men used to stain their teeth a red color and women would stain theirs black. This custom has now largely died out.

Before the advent of Communism in Vietnam, the Sila were greatly oppressed by the Thai landowners in Lai Chau. Each village had a *tao ban*, or chief, who was appointed by the Thais. A tax collector, called *sa qua*, frequently visited the Sila and collected high and unfair taxes for

what the Thais considered the privilege of allowing the Sila to live on their land.

Today each Sila family lineage has a *lu lu*, who acts as village chief, judge, and officiates at marriages and funerals. Shamans, called *mo*, are respected by all. Their responsibilities are to administer all the worship and religious rituals undertaken by the Sila.

Marriage between people from the same lineage is strictly forbidden out of fear of in-breeding. Sila marriages take place in two separate stages. One year after the couple are officially married, a ceremony is held where the dowry is handed over from the groom's family to the bride's. They are given the one year period to allow them to come up with the necessary money and gifts. Only then is the bride allowed to leave the village of her upbringing and start a new life.

When a woman falls pregnant she is required to observe a number of taboos and superstitions relating to eating and drinking. A few days after she has given birth an old woman from the village is invited to name the child. Boy's names are always given the suffix *Cha*, while girl's names end with *Co*.

The primary religious stronghold among the Sila is ancestor worship. A ceremony is conducted in which the soul of the deceased is given directions to help it find its way back to the Sila homeland in Muong U, northern Laos.

Coffins are made from a hollowed out tree trunk. The cemetery is located just outside the village. Graves are arranged according to each person's lineage. Entertainment is organized and people are not allowed to grieve or cry for the person who has died. While in mourning for their parents, Sila men comb their hair up on to their heads and daughters do not wear any jewelry. Children are not allowed to marry for at least three years after the death of a parent.



Pray for the Sila

- 1 The Sila are a completely unevangelized and unreached people. The Name of Jesus Christ is unheralded among them. Pray this situation would soon change.
- 2 Ask God to send laborers to the Sila in both Vietnam and Laos. Pray they would be received by 'men of peace' who would help the Gospel's acceptance by the leaders of the Sila communities.
- 3 Few Christians have even heard of the Sila. Pray that many fervent prayers would be offered up for this Christ-less people group.



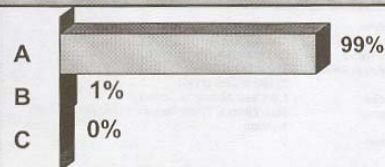
Population:
594 (1989)
735 (2000)
900 (2010)

Language:
Sino-Tibetan

Religion:
Ancestor Worship

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

Overview of the Sila

Countries : Laos, Vietnam
Prominization : "See-lah"
Other Names : Cu De Xu, Kha Pe
Population Source : 594 (1989 census);
19,000 in Laos (1993)
Location : Lai Chau: Muong Te District
Language : Sino-Tibetan, Tibeto-Burman, Burmese-Lolo, Lolo,
Southern
Dialects : 0

Subgroups : 0
Religion : Ancestor Worship, Animism, Shamanism
Christians : none known
Scripture : none
Jesus film : none
Gospel Recordings : none
Christian Radio : none
ROPAL code : SLT00