

# Laos

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# Profile of Laos

## Overview

Laos is officially known as Lao People's Democratic Republic (or Sathalanalat Paxathipatai Paxaxon Lao).

It is a one-party communist state with an estimated population of 6.36 million (2006 estimates). The border countries of Cambodia, China and Thailand all played a part in the making of today's Laos.

Nowadays, Vietnam -as a fellow one-party communist state- still exerts a strong influence on its political decision-making and Thailand is the largest foreign investor in Laos!

Laos is one of the least economically advanced and most mysterious of the three former French Indochina's states <sup>1</sup>.

## Recent History

Some effects of colonial rule worsened by internecine conflicts and rigid socialism brought the country to its knees in the 1970s and sparked a massive emigration flow. It is estimated that during that period, 10% of the population left the country.

Laos' authorities started decentralizing control and encouraging private enterprise in 1986.

In 2004, the US Senate granted Normal Trade Relationship (NTR) status to Laos. International organisations such as the IMF have encouraged the economic opening of the country. As a result, its economy has steadily grown.

However, the situation remains precarious and the recent threat of the avian flu in the region could hamper this trend. Besides, the shadow of opium cultivation is still lurking in the background.

In terms of freedom of speech and human rights, the development is much less significant as the Communist Party continues acting as a censor and maintains a tight grip on the media.

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<sup>1</sup> French Indochina comprised today's Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

The Lao PDR counts between 47<sup>2</sup> to 97 ethnic minorities, depending on the criteria used for the classification (such a horrendous word, isn't it!).

Prior to 1975, France, the USA and the then Soviet Union recorded 68 "tribes". However, in its 1995 census, the Lao authorities counted 47 distinctive ethnoses. More recently, in his book *Ethnic Groups of Laos* (White Lotus, 2003), J. Schliesinger distinguished 97 groups!

The military has been criticized for the human right abuses of the Hmong ethnic minority and harsh repression of Hmong's low-level rebellion against the authorities since 1975. In a letter dated October 17, 2006, Hmong International Human Rights Watch, an organization dedicated to defending Hmong rights worldwide, wrote to Lao PDR's ambassador in the US to plea on behalf of the Hmong families who had been abused and arbitrarily detained, and the Hmong community at large.

## Ethnic Groups in Laos

### A Small Territory with a Wealth of Ethnic Groups

As we mentioned in the country introduction, Lao PDR counts between 47 to 97 ethnic minorities, depending on the criteria the census is based on.

All classifications agree though on a simplified division of Laos' ethnic groups into three main branches named after their geographical locations:

- The Lao Loum or Lowland Lao represent approximately 68% of the total population.

This group includes the Lao, Lu, Phuan and all Austro-Thai language-speaking groups (Tai Dam [Black Tai], Tai Deng [Red Tai], etc).

- The Lao T(h)eung, also called Lao Kang (literally the Lao up there), or Midland Lao total an estimated 22% of the total population. This group encompasses all Austro-Asiatic language-speaking groups (i.e. Kammu and Lamet from the North, Katang

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<sup>2</sup> The 47 ethnic groups recognized by Laos are named as: Alak, Bit, Chere, Hmong, Haw, Ha-nhi, Jri, Kaw, Katang, Khmu, Katu, Kui, Khmer, Kri, Lao, Lue, Laven, Lavae, Lamet, Lolo, Lavi, Makong, Museu, Mon, Nhuon, Ngae, Nhaheun, Nguon, Oi, Phu Thai, Phu-Noi, Phong, Pakoh, Souei, Samtao, Singmun, Sila, Sadang, Saek, Ta-Oi, Taliang, Thin, Tum, Yao, Yae, Yang and Yumbri.

and Makong in Central Laos, Laven and Lawae groups in Southern Laos).

In comparison to the two other branches of Laos' ethnic groups, the Lao Theung groups differ greatly from one another.

Besides, the population census varies a lot among the 37 different ethnic Lao Theung groups: the Numbri count less than a hundred while the Kammu boast a 400,000 population!

- The Lao Soung (also written Song, which literally means Lao of the Summit) or Highland Lao amount to 9% of Laos' population <sup>3</sup>. This group includes the Hmong-Mien (Austro-Thai) and all Sino-Tibetan speaking groups (i.e. Hmong, Yao, Akha, Phu Noi, etc).
- Finally, ethnic Vietnamese/Chinese make up the remaining 1% of Laos' ethnic population.

### Three to Six Language Groups

Some researchers further regroup ethnic minorities according to the family of language they speak as follows:

- Lao-Tai
- Mon-Khmer
- Hmong-Yao, also called Miao-Yao
- Tibe-Myanmar, also called Tibeto-Burman
- Viet-Mouang or Viet-Moung
- Han or Hor

Some other studies prefer to classify most of Laos' ethnic minorities' languages under the

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<sup>3</sup> Based on 2006 population estimates.

Austro-Thai<sup>4</sup>, Austro-Asiatic<sup>5</sup> and Sino-Tibetan<sup>6</sup> language families and then further divide each them into sub-groups (see notes [4], [5] and [6] for more details).

A mosaic of languages and groups can seem a bit daunting at first, but it is also the legacy of Laos' history and regional migration patterns, and as such is a unique treasure of humanity!

We will not explore all the minorities but only a few of them at present by drawing a group from each of the three main ethnic branches (Lowland, Midland and Highland Lao).

## **The Taim Dam**

### **The Tai in Laos**

Between the ninth and thirteenth centuries, Tai people migrated south from Yunnan into South-East Asia. In Burma, they became known as Shan and in the upper Mekong region as Lao-Tai.

Distinctive tribal groups emerged in the central regions of today's Vietnam: the Tai Dam (Black Tai), Tai Deng (Red Tai), Tai Kao (White Tai) and Nung. Following intertribal fighting, many tribal Tai clans such as Tai Dam, Tai Deng and Tai Kao migrated to the Muang Lang Namtha district and neighbouring areas (Bokeo, Phongsali and Oudomxai) in Northern Laos in the nineteenth century.

A second migratory flow occurred in 1953-54, during the Dien Bien Phu War, as tribal Tai tried to escape reprisal or forceful enrolment into the conflict.

The tribal Lao-Tai do not only include Tai Dam, Tai Deng and Tai Kao groups, but also Tai Neua or Tai of the North, Tai Phuan and Phu Tai. There are also a few Tai Lue (also called Xishuangbanna Dai in Pingyin Chinese [Tai speakers are called Dai people in China]) and Tai Neua (also called Dehong Dai in Pinyin Chinese) in Muang Sing region, on the border with China.

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4 The Austro-Thai family of languages in Laos is divided between the Tai-Kadai speakers, Hmong-Yao group and Malayo-Polynesian group.

5 The Austro-Asiatic language family (equivalent in Laos to the Mon-Khmer language group) is divided into the Bahnaric, Katuic, Khmuic, Palaungic, Viet-Muong and unspecified Mon-Khmer speakers.

6 The Sino-Tibetan linguistic branch is divided in Laos into the Han speakers and the Lolo-Burmish ones.

We are going to focus at present on the largest group among the tribal Tai population in Laos: the Tai Dam.

## The Tai Dam

The origins of the name Tai Dam, meaning Black Tai, is sometimes attributed to French colonizers who named this group after their black clothing, coloured from indigo dye. Others said the name is actually referring to the Dam River in the then central Vietnamese region of Sip Song Chau Tai (meaning 'Twelve Tai Principalities').



The Tai Dam count the largest population among the tribal Tai with 120,000 individuals living in Laos.

## The Tai Dam Mythical Origins

*Kwam Toe Muang* (literally 'Storytelling of the World') is the Tai Dam origins' myth, a story passed down from one generation to the next through oral tradition.

According to the story, the Earth and the Heavens were originally tied together by a rope, which prevented people to go about their daily activities.

To remedy the situation, the ancestral grandparents, *Pu Kong Fa* (literally: Bent-Over Grandfather of the Sky) and *Ya Kong Din* (literally: Bent-Over Grandmother of the Earth) cut the rope and as a result the humans became free of their movements.

Now that the sky was drifting above the earth, the *Thaen*, or Lords of the Heavens, could

see across the whole planet. With newly found freedom but no ruler to govern, people started fighting over and killing each other off. Then came the drought and all living beings perished. The ancestors, *Pu Kong Fa* and *Ya Kong Din* came again to the rescue.

Thanks to their magical rituals, the skies burst and water soon covered the whole earth for three months. Four giant gourds containing "550 clans of Tai, 330 clans of hill people, 330 varieties of rice, 310 kinds of fishes, and every kind of animal [...]" were sent from the heavens and placed on the receding waters. The gourds then settled in different *muongs* (also called 'muangs', the equivalent of a small state) across Laos, Vietnam and China.

The animals were the first to be released, and the humans followed shortly. The population started to grow and went on to populate other *muongs* and *ban* (villages).

A social structure and political hierarchy was established; people abode by rules and lived in harmony with nature.

The myth finishes with the following verse: "It is our distinct language, which is the root and fiber of the Tai Dam nation. Our fame, like a loud drum, will resound around the world."

## **Tai Dam Language**

The Tai Dam dialect belongs to the Tai branch of the Tai-Kadai family of languages.

According to some academics, Tai Dam dialect is actually closer to Northeastern Thai. However, Tai Dam have their own alphabet, strongly influenced by the Lao & Thai alphabets and to a lesser extent, by Latin scriptures.

The Tai Dam language is notable for its six tones, and the alphabet itself displays a high and low form for each consonant letter.

Today, most Tai Dam people under the age of 40 cannot write or read in their language.

## **Tai Dam Society: Household and Social Stratum**

### **Household**

The Tai Dam society is based on patriarchal relationships.

There is a religious background to this social set-up. Tai Dam men are responsible for

dealing with the ancestral spirits of the household and when marrying, women always accept their husband ancestral spirits as theirs.

As a consequence, Tai Dam men take all-important decisions related to his family and only sons inherit valuable items, such as household property - the eldest son receiving most of the properties according to his age. In comparison, women never inherit house or land property.

This can also be explained by the fact that sons must look after their elderly parents and are also held responsible for appeasing the ancestral spirits of the household once their father age.

## **Social Stratum**

The Tai Dam society is divided into two social groups:

- The Sing Thao, i.e. the ruling/upper class
- The Sing Phu Noi, i.e. the lower class, the common people .

The main difference between these two groups is in the way the *sen ruan* (see Religion section below) and funeral ceremonies are performed.

The lower class Tai Dam *sen ruan* offerings (for instance: a pig) are not as big as the upper class ones (for instance: cattle). Besides, less people attend Sing Phu Noi's funeral ceremonies and the event is a much low-key affair altogether.

However, in everyday life, one cannot differentiate a Sing Thao from a Sing Phu Noi, hence we can say that this social divide is only a symbolic reminiscence of feudalism.

## **Religion and Beliefs**

The Tai Dam differentiate themselves from other Tai groups with their religious and cultural conservatism by not adhering to Buddhism.

They are animists: they believe in spirits which inhabit forests, cities, villages and buses, etc.

The two most important ceremonies are the *sen ruan* (a ritual performed for the ancestral spirits of a household) and the funeral ceremony.

Tai Dam also follow the cult of their ancestors and great importance is given to the *Kwam Toe Muang*, the Tai Dam origins' myth.

*Kwam Toe Muang* is recounted when members of a Tai Dam family congregate before the burial of a family member. Tai Dam believe that telling the story will guide the soul (*kwan*) of the deceased back to the ancestors who reside in the Land of the Heavens (*Muang Fa*), alongside the Lords of the Heavens (*Thaen*).

According to their beliefs, the father's ancestral spirit is the main spirit in the realm of the spirits and therefore the family pays great respect to its soul in all ritual ceremonies.

### Tai Dam Clothing

In the past, a Tai Dam woman's ability to weave and embroider silk or cotton cloth served as a display of her value as a future spouse.



On a daily basis, women usually wear a long black shiny skirt, a wide -usually green- belt with silver chains hanging from it, a colourful top with silver butterfly buttons sewn over a strip of fabric covering the central part of the blouse.

Wedding is the occasion for every Taim Dam woman to display her know-how and the bride's skirt and blouse are especially made for the occasion. The bride also wears jewellery given to her by the groom.

Although Tai Dam men clothing does not differ from Lao men in everyday life, they also wear a distinctive outfit on their wedding day (long white trousers and an open long black

cotton tunic shirt).

Today's young Tai Dam are increasingly influenced by Western fashion and shun the traditional dress in favour of more "modern" outfits in search of mainstream acceptance.

## **The Lamet**

According to many historians, the Lamet – and the Lao Theung to whom they are related - are the original inhabitants of what is now Laos.

After the Lao moved into the territory that will soon become their eponymous country, the original Mon-Khmer groups moved into the hills.

The Lamet (together with the Kammu, Loven and others) are the immediate descendants of these groups.

Nowadays, this group lives in the north-western part of the country and only number 16,740 <sup>7</sup> individuals.

## **The Lamet Language**

The Lamet language belongs to the Austro-Asiatic family of languages.

It is closely related to the Kammu and Sam Tao languages, but is not mutually intelligible with most of the other Lao Theung dialects.

The Lamet language has not developed an alphabet and the literacy rate among the population is very poor at between 25 to 50%.

Unsurprisingly -from an ethnologist's point of view- there are many similarities between the Palaung (Myanmar) and Lamet languages.

## **The Lamet: the 'Lao Up There'**

### **The Midlands vs. the Lowlands**

Although the Lamet are mostly self-sufficient, they do not live in isolation and sometimes go down to the lowlands to earn extra cash (the Lao Theung are considered the poorest of the three ethnic groups in Laos) for necessary purchases.

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<sup>7</sup> Figure based on the 1995 national census.

The Lao Loum -or Lowland Lao- traditionally look down upon them and sometimes label them *Kha*, meaning slaves.

### **The Village Authority**

The choice of a village site is a highly important matter and follows the advice of the village spiritual leader: the *xemia*. A headman whose role is to deal not only with villagers but also outsiders governs every village.

Elders also hold an important position when it comes to taking decisions concerning the village itself.

As there is no written script in the Lamet language, every decision taken among villagers must be memorized.

### **The Village and Houses**

A typical Lamet village consists of 20 to 30 households clustered with neither visible organisation nor orientation.

In practical terms, villages are located close to a water source, diverted through bamboo pipes to enable bathing and filling containers for all villagers.

The village is traditionally separated into two parts on both sides of the men's communal house.

Lamet houses are built on bamboo or wooden stilts one meter at least above the ground. They are usually quite large in size with a minimum of 35 m<sup>2</sup> of living surface. The walls and floors are usually made from woven bamboo and the roof from grass thatch.

Every house has a porch on whichever side.

A separate rice barn is located on the edge of the village.

### **The Lamet Social Organisation**

#### **The Household**

The Lamet society is traditionally patriarchal: men are heads of household and as such act as the final decision-makers.

The typical household counts six to seven individuals but can also be as large as fourteen persons.

The household usually consists of the parents and children, as well as the sons' spouses and grandchildren. Married sons will eventually moved out of the parents' house to establish their own households.

In the past, male adolescents would sleep at the village communal house during the night and stay at their parents' only during the day. It is also not rare to witness a son-in-law living a few years in the same household as his parents' bride and work for his father-in-law in payment of the bridal price. When the "debt" is fully paid back, the young couple will either move to their own house or with the groom's father.

Polygyny is not the norm but it is tolerated among Lamet people at the condition that the groom can provide for each of his wives – few men can afford this in reality.

### **The Clans**

The Lamet have seven totemic clans that serve as a basis for social organisation and control marriages by promoting exogamy<sup>8</sup>.

Every village includes at least two clans, thus encouraging interclanic marriages. The clan-based organisation also helps in developing relationships not only with villagers but also with outsiders.

For instance, when a Lamet villager must travel outside, he will turn to fellow clan members for help when arriving in another village.

### **Wealth and Status**

Wealth is a decisive factor in Lamet villages' function and society at large.

As a result, there is a clear separation between a *lem*, someone who is wealthy, and other villagers.

To become a *lem*, a villager must own some cattle, bronze drums, etc and be acknowledged by an existing *lem*. This system is also applied to the selection of *pho ban* (village headman) who acts as intermediate between Lao officials or outsiders in general and the villagers.

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<sup>8</sup> Marriage of a man outside his own clan.

Therefore, unlike many other ethnic groups, many Lamet headmen do not acquire their position because of their experience or popularity among villagers but on the basis of their wealth.

## **Swidden Agriculture**

Lamet people are traditionally farmers. They mainly live from swidden rice cultivation and may keep the village location mobile on the basis of their need for new arable land.

Swidden rice cultivation is not as productive as paddy fields and in order to supplement rice supply, the Lamet increasingly vary their cultivation sources to include corn, cassava and wild tubers.

The forest also represents a rich source of food and material. Men hunt for small game in the forests surrounding their villages, while both men and women collect bamboo and wild plants and vegetables -such as mushrooms- which grow in excess on the forest's grounds.

Until recently, the swidden agriculture-based economy involved little trade with other groups and it resulted in an economic marginalization of Lamet villages in the 1990s.

Of course, Lamet villagers go to work in the lowlands when necessary but prejudicial attitudes from Lowland Lao continue to affect the economic development of many Lamet villages.

## **Lamet Beliefs**

The Lamet are mainly animists. They believe that *phi*, spirits of non-living objects, are everywhere and are both sources of good and evil.

Every village has a *xemia*, a ritual leader in charge of conducting ceremonies and performing sacrifices to appease the village spirits.

They also worship their ancestors' spirits in return for their protection, guidance and help in times of hardship.

Rituals are always performed at the start of important Lamet events, such as rice planting.

## The Yao

The Yao are one of the largest among the six<sup>9</sup> Lao Sung (Upland Lao) ethnic groups with an estimated population of nearly 100,000<sup>10</sup>.

They live primarily in the Bokeo and Louang Namtha provinces, the mountainous northern areas of Laos. This group also has a significant population in neighbouring countries having initially migrated from China into Burma and Thailand, before reaching Laos in the early nineteenth century.

Northern Laos with its natural setting of high mountains and dense jungle and less pressure from the then authorities was an ideal destination for this reclusive group.

### Yao Language and Culture

The Yao language is part of the Austro-Thai family of languages in Laos.

The language of the Highland Yao is called *Mian*.

Unlike other Lao ethnic groups, the Yao have a strong tradition of literacy. Yao concepts use Chinese characters to record important religious rituals and family genealogies.

### Yao Village

#### Location

Yao traditionally live in villages distant from Lao Loum and Lao Theung settlements. However, they are not isolated and use trade as a means of communicating with outsiders.

Due to the high altitude, houses are made of durable hardwood and are strong enough to sustain the winds and torrential rains that sweep the highlands in Laos.

Houses are also large so that ceremonial events can be held indoors.

### Yao Household

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<sup>9</sup> The other Lao Sung groups are traditionally the Hmong, Phu Noi, Lahu, Kui and Hô.

<sup>10</sup> 2000 estimates.



A typical Yao household consists not only of the parents, their unmarried children, their married sons and daughters-in-law, and grandchildren but also sometimes of other relatives!

Such extended family household is another factor behind the sheer size of Yao houses and is also a motor behind the intergenerational solidarity and community spirit.

As a result, rearing children is the preoccupation of the whole family and not only of the direct parents.

### **Social Organisation**

Each individual has a position in Yao society. Women are in charge of daily tasks essential for maintaining the family while men look after their families' welfare in the long term. For instance, while women plant and harvest, men prepare cultivable lands by felling jungle trees and burning areas.

Men are also responsible for the relations between their living families, their dead ancestors and the world of spirits.

The community spirit is very strong among Yao villagers: they work together to build houses and prepare fields for cultivation, and hold village celebrations and feasts to cement this bond.

Social status in a Yao village is based upon one's actions and generosity towards others and one's knowledge of rituals and family genealogies through mastering of Chinese

language (see Language section).

### **The Yao: Cultivators**

Yao's main cash crop used to be the sinister red gold: opium. Although on one side it earned immediate income to households, on the mid-term it also brought addictions among male villagers and as consequence poverty in Yao villages.

Today, the combined efforts of NGOs have helped many Yao villages move away from opium cultivation.

The Yao villagers cultivate more rice and corn, and use the jungles surrounding their villages as an extra source of income: resin and honey are items of trade with Lao. The jungle is also essential in providing essential construction material, firewood and arable land.

Yao mainly relate to the outside world through market trade.

### **Yao Beliefs**

The Yao way of living is influenced in its core by their animist and ancestral beliefs.

Taoism, possibly due to the Chinese origins of the group, also influences the way rituals are conducted.

As they believe that spirits inhabits non-living things and are everywhere, Yao are careful of respecting their surroundings and spend time ensuring that the spirits are satisfied.

They also observe ancestors' rituals and pay respect to them to ensure continued protection of the household.

**Yao Clothing**



Yao women wear distinctive embroidered tunics elaborately decorated and sewn at the front with bright red woollen collars. They also adorn their ears with big earrings.

Young children wear highly embroidered hats, supposedly protecting them from evil spirits.



## The Lo Lo

### Origins and Language

Lo Lo people are mainly based in the districts of Bao Lac (Cao Bang), Dong Van and Meo Vac (Ha Giang) and Muong Khuong (Lao Cai).



It is thought that the Lo Lo originated from southern China regions such as Sichuan and Yunnan where they are still known as *Pu* - included in the Yi national minority. (See Yi in 'Ethnic Groups in China' section).

In China, the term Lo Lo is deemed derogatory as it was used to refer to the small baskets that the Yi carried around, which they believed carried the souls of their dead ancestors.

Though they started their migration by the end of the first millennium, the Lo Lo people only migrated en masse to Vietnam in the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The Lo Lo call themselves *Mun Di* or *Man Chi*.

The Lo Lo language is part of the Tibeto-Burman family of languages.

This ethnic group used to have a pictographic script, which was used for rituals and known to shamans only, but it has been mainly forgotten.

The Lo Lo can be divided into two sub-groups: the *Lo Lo Den* (Black Lo Lo) and the *Lo Lo Hoa* (Multicoloured Lo Lo).

These two groups have very different costumes (particularly women's), traditions and rituals.

## Lo Lo Villages

The Lo Lo set up their villages on mountain slopes surrounded by forests.

According to Lo Lo animist beliefs, nature is the residence of spirits; hence it must be protected from harm.

Lo Lo houses are of three different types: the stilt houses, mud houses and stilt-with-mud houses.

The door of the house always face down slope.

