

Hmong, Lao, Mien, Lahu, Khmu - Refugees From Laos

During the Vietnam War Hmong, Lao, and other groups from Laos and neighboring countries were recruited by the CIA to help the United States fight communists in the area and helped U.S. pilots and the CIA who were shot down. They were a loyal and hard-fighting army that were referred to as the U.S. Secret army. In 1975 the U.S. withdrew its troops and advisers from Laos, South Vietnam, and Cambodia according to the 1973 Paris Peace Agreement on Indochina. These groups had to flee Laos for their lives or face persecution. Many ended up in refugee camps in Thailand.

The Hmong lived in the highlands (mountains) of Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia while the Lowland Lao people lived in the valley floors. In between these two groups and living in the middle elevations, mountains, and various parts of Laos were the Mien, Khmu, and Lahu people.

The first refugees started coming to the U.S. in late 1975, and groups continually came until the program ended in 1999. Currently, there are about 25,000 Hmong living in Fresno, California. About 500 Hmong, 250 Lao, 13 Mien, and 10 Cambodian were engaged in farming according to a 1992 survey. The numbers are probably considerably higher since the figures are 15 years old and it is difficult to document all of the many small 1-10 acre farms because of the transient nature of these groups.

The **Hmong** lived in the mountains of Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, and Burma. Hmong are not Chinese, Thai, or Lao. Their beginnings are not known for sure. The name itself means ‘free’. They speak their own language, separate from Lao and Mien, although many Hmong also speak the Lao language. The Hmong language has either eight or twelve tones (depending on the reference), thus the spelling looks quite different from the pronunciation (see dictionary on this page). A written Hmong language using the Romanized Popular alphabet was not developed until the early 1960’s. There are two main subgroups within the Hmong culture – White Hmong (Hmoob Dawb) and Green (Blue) Hmong (Hmoob Njua). Hmong society is divided into 18-19 clans or tribes, according to their last name.

Vang	Vue	Cha	Xiong	Lee
Mua	Yang	Her	Lo	Thao
Pha	Chue	Cheng	Kong	Hang
Kue	Fang	Khang	Lor	

The native **Laotian** people are closely related to the Northern Thai people and live in the Lowland areas and main cities of Laos. They are referred to as lowland Lao.

It is believed the **Mien** originated in central China and lived in the middle elevations of Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. They too have a separate language.

The **Khmu** live in Northern Laos and Cambodia in the middle elevations below the Hmong and Mien. Khmu women are accorded a relatively high status and must consent before being given away in marriage.

Lahu people originated in the Yunnan Province of Southern China and migrated to Laos, Thailand, and Burma. Examples of Lahu surnames include Saesee, See, Balang, and Seechan.

Sources of Information:

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