

Lao and Hmong Culture & Foods

Country of Origin: Laos

Primary Language(s): Laotian, and 85 other languages

Percent of Iowa's Population: 2.6% of Iowa's Population is Asian



Laos is a country in Southeast Asia.

It neighbors five other countries: China to the north, Vietnam to the northeast and east, Cambodia to the south, Thailand to the west, and Myanmar (Burma) to the northwest.



Traditional costume is the "Salong" for Laotian men and the "sinh" for Laotian women.

Education and Literacy

Before the war, educational opportunities in Laos were extremely limited; therefore, knowledge was passed down orally. Literacy rates have fluctuated considerably in recent years. In 2015, adult literacy rate for Lao People's Democratic Republic was 79.9%.

In the US, the estimated Laotian population in 2015 was 217,000 and the estimated Hmong population was 299,000; of which, over 60% indicated they speak English very well

Background

The country of Laos is linguistically diverse. The Official language of Laos is Lao, which has many dialects based on geographical locations. The major Lao dialects are Southern Lao, Western Lao, Central Lao, Northeastern Lao, Northern Lao, and Vientiane Lao, the latter being widely understood. About half of the population of Laos can use Lao. Due to migration and conflict, the ethnic composition of Laos is diverse leading to an additional 85 languages used by various ethnic groups living in Laos.

Following the Vietnam War, more than 3 million Lao, Vietnamese, and Cambodians left their home due to conflicts in Southeast Asia. In 1975, under President Ford, refugees were granted resettlement in the United States.

The Word Lao is traditionally used to describe the Lao people, whereas the Hmong are an ethnic group within the country of Laos. The Hmong are a distinct ethno-linguistic group that originated in China, but when the Chinese began limiting their freedoms, many migrated to Laos, Thailand and other neighboring countries. There are several million Hmong in southwestern China, and 1 million in Southeast Asia. The Hmong language has two dialects: white and green

During the Vietnam War, the Hmong in Laos collaborated with American forces to fight Southeast Asian Communists. After the US pulled out of Laos, Communist forces began retaliating against the Hmong. Many died, thousands fled, and numerous refugee camps were set up in Thailand. Many Hmong families resettled in the US, France, Australia and other parts of the world. An estimated 170,000-186,000 Hmong who have resettled in the United States, originated from Laos.

Traditions, Customs, & Taboos

Laotian learn to weave from a very early age since weaving is an essential skill for every woman to claim her artfulness. A good wife is one who can weave well.

Many Laotian Americans have retained values brought with them from their homeland. Most significant among these values is the practice of Buddhism. While individual Laotian Americans may not follow all Buddhist teachings, its philosophy serves as a behavioral guide. Some Laotians have converted to Protestant Christianity, especially in areas where there are not large Laotian concentration to sustain traditional religious practices.

Among Hmong Americans, about 50% have converted to Christianity. Those who have retained their traditional beliefs are generally animists, which is a religious belief that objects, places and creatures all possess a distinct spiritual essence. According to this system of beliefs, protective and wild spirits inhabit many objects and natural settings in the world.

Holidays & Celebrations

A traditional Laos wedding is typically held at the bride's family home. Wedding ceremonies or "*suu Knwan*" involve the entire village or community. Marriage is a lifelong commitment and is taken seriously. The groom and bride wear traditional bright colored costumes with gold details.

Festival is a time when people join to celebrate and share happiness, from harvest festivities to welcoming the New Year and temple-related celebrations. Laos festivals and events often honor Buddhism; the country's main religion, and are often filled with colorful parades, parties and unique ceremonies.

The Elephant; the national animal in Laos, is a symbol of prosperity and represents the strength of nation. Laos is the "country of million elephants"; however, due to loss of forest habitat, there is significant decline of the Asian elephant in the wild. The *Elephant festival* exist since 2006, which promotes ancient cultural values and raises awareness to help protect this endangered animal.

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Health Disparities

Traditional Laotian Medicine involves massages and herbal cues. Chants and healing rituals are commonly used, since sickness is often seen as a problem of spiritual essence.

Hmong spiritual beliefs are strongly connected to their sense of health and well-being. Hmong may view illnesses as having a natural or a spiritual cause. Traditional healing practices rely on certain individuals to diagnose and treat ailments; these include shamans, herbalists, magical healers, and others.

When working with the Lao and the Hmong, as with all populations, avoid stereotyping and consider each client as a unique individual. With any medical diagnosis, be sure to ask about their understanding of the illness and its causes. Show respect for their beliefs and tailor educational messages accordingly.

Traditional Foods & Meal Patterns

Laotian cuisine is spicy. Most meals contain rice (*khao*) or rice noodles (*khao poon*). "Sticky," rice is the food most often associated with Laotian cuisine. Meat, fish, and vegetables accompany the rice. Meats are often chopped, pounded, and spiced, and fish is usually eaten with a special sauce called *nam ba*. A papaya salad spiced with hot peppers, which is known as *tam mak hoong* to Laotians and *som tam* to Thais, is a popular snack food.

Many Laotian Americans still eat Lao-style foods at home. These dishes are also available at most Thai restaurants, since the cooking of northeastern Thailand is almost identical to that of Laos. Sticky rice and other ingredients for Lao foods are likewise available at most stores that specialize in Asian foods.

What's the Iowa Connection?

After the US pulled out from Southeast Asia, the communists targeted the Hmong, causing the Hmong to run for their lives. The Lao and The Hmong started arriving in Iowa in 1976.

According to the United States census, 2.6% of Iowa's total population identify themselves as Asian¹, based on 2018 estimates. Iowa counties with higher concentration of Asians as a percent of that county's total population includes Dallas County (4.8%) Polk County (4.9%), Johnston County (6.6%), Story County (8.5%), Buena Vista County (9.2%) and Jefferson County (13.2%)

1. Includes all Asian Categories, not only Laotian & Hmong



"Tam mak Hoong"
Green
Papaya
Salad

"Thsuai Rau
Qaib"
Hmong
chicken herb
soup



Considerations for WIC

Lactose intolerance is caused by a reduction of lactase activity and production. Symptoms typically include abdominal pain, bloating, flatulence and diarrhea occurring 30 to 120 minutes following ingestion of lactose containing food. It is estimated up to 90% of the adult Asian population may present with lactose intolerance of varying degrees. Individuals with lactose intolerance may be able to eat dairy foods with low lactose content, such as cheese and yogurt. Asian Americans are at high risk for developing osteoporosis of which a diet low in calcium may be a contributing factor. *Consider offering lactose-free milk, soymilk and/or Tofu with WIC benefits.*

Breastfeeding initiation rates among American Asian tend to be higher compared to overall US rates. 86.4% of Asian mothers reported ever breastfed, versus 73.6% of all new mothers initiating breastfeeding, per 2007 data. Within the country of Laos, in 2000; mothers of the Lao People's Democratic Republic reported ever breastfed at 94.9%. *Consider common barriers to breastfeeding such as: lack of access or knowledge regarding breastfeeding, preferences to bottle feed, pain or discomfort, lack of social or cultural acceptance, employment, lack of time, inconvenience, language and literacy barriers.*

The Chicken Diet; a Hmong postpartum diet. *Thsuai rau Qaib* is a traditional holistic chicken herb soup within the Hmong Culture passed from generation to generation. This soup can be served as a normal meal, or in times of illness. Traditionally it is served to women who have just given birth and is recommended for 30 days postpartum as a remedy to heal their bodies. Hmong women are to strictly follow this diet for the entire month. The meal consists of boiled chicken in lemongrass broth with special herbs, to be eaten warm with soft rice, and warm or hot water may be served as a beverage.

How are we Living?

Laotian Americans have a reputation as hardworking people. Education has become extremely important and Laotians may expect their children to study first and study hard. Parents sacrifice for them so they can study well.

Hmong culture places a high value on the family and clan. There are 18 clans, and members of a clan recognize a common ancestor relates them. Children are members of the father's clan. Women become part of her husband's family upon marriage but typically retain their original clan name. The 18 clans are: Chang/Cha, Cheng, Chue, Fang, Her, Hang, Khang, Kong, Kue, Lee/Ly, Lor, Moua, Pha, Thao, Vang, Vue, Xiong, Yang.

