

## The Va Ethnic Group



Ox plays a very important role in the Va culture. The Va people have the custom of sacrificing ox to the Heaven. The head of ox symbolizes fortune and good luck. Wooden drum is its ethnical musical instrument, which was said to be a matter that leads to the gods. People usually beat such drums on occasions like offering sacrifice to gods or ancestors or gathering people. The pattern composed of ox head, wooden drum and gourd stands for simplicity, purity, vigor, and a well-off society.

### The population

The Vas has a population of 396 610, which is basically distributed in Cangyuan Va Autonomous County and Ximeng Va Autonomous County in the southwestern parts of Yunnan Province. Other counties Like Lancang, Menglian, Yongde Shuangjiang, Gengma and Zhenkang also have Va people. The Vas' inhabiting area is mountainous and thus is called A' Va Mountain.



The Vas call themselves A' Vas, which means people living in mountains. There are still other names for them, such as Va, Le Va, Burao, La, Va Beng, Va Gude or En Ren, Accordingly, the Vas can be categorized into six or seven branches. These branches were united as the Vas in 1962 according to their own will.

### The historical origin—The legend of Sigangli

There are many tales about the origin of the Va culture, among which Sigangli is the most important one. The Ximeng Vas believed that "Sigang" means stone carves where the Vas originated, while Cangyuan Vas consider it a type of calabash. The Vas' inhabiting area is the birthplace of both stone cave and calabash. Consequently, we may conclude the Vas were the earliest inhabitant in this area.

Scholars believe that the ancestors of the Vas belong to Baipu (a branch of local ethnic group in the pre-Qin period). Minpu and Luopu mentioned in some historical records are believed to be the ancestors of the Vas, the Blangs and the De'angs. According to Manshu (Book on Minority People) by Fan Chuo in the Tang Dynasty, terms like Wangman, Wangjuziman have the same pronunciation but different spellings as the present spelling. In the Ming Danasty and the Qing Dynasty, the Vas were called Hala, Hawa, or Kawa. The Qing government once conferred a title on the leader of the Vas as Banhong Tusi (hereditary headman).

### The subgroups and the language

The language of the Vas belongs to the Va-De'ang branch of Bangladesh-Cambodia group of Southern-Asian language family, which could be roughly divided into three dialects: the Va, the Lewa and the Burao. In the 1930s some foreign missionaries created a pinyin language, but it was only used among Christians. In 1956 the fundamental dialect of the Va language was designed according to the dialect of Burao and its pronunciation was based on Yanshuai dialect. Such language is being promoted among the Va people.

### **The featured housing—The house with walls on the ground and the heating stoves for offering sacrifices**

The Va villages are usually perched on the top of hills or on mountainsides. The number of families in each village differs, ranging from 20 up to over 300. The house is located irregularly according to the shape of the mountains and built in picturesque order. There are taboos about choosing the date and materials for building a house. For instance, people believed that a house should be built within one day, or it will bring bad luck. Therefore, all the villagers would come to help when building a house.

Traditional houses include the “house on pillars” and the “house with walls on the ground”. The houses on pillars are often built with bamboo or wood. The people live in the upper floor and the lower floor is used for keeping livestock. The “house with walls on the ground” is also known as “chicken cage”. The structure of the house is simple: four wood logs are combined as the main crossbeams of the house and other two as rafters. Some hay covers the main structure. The whole house, with gradient eaves, is surrounded by bamboo fence.

The setting of the house is quite simple except that the heating stoves are exquisite. There are usually three stoves for daily use, for heating cattle's feed and for offering sacrifices. It is absolutely forbidden of confusing the three types of stoves as it may offend the gods.

### **The costumes and ornaments—The favorite color black and red**

The Va people like clothes in black color. Men often wrap their heads with black cloth and wear collarless right-buttoned jackets, wide and short trousers. They also carry black hand-made bags with laces decorating the edges. When they go out for traveling, they carry broadsword, arrows and copper gun, which demonstrate their courage and manhood.

Women usually keep long hair rather than bear plaits. They wear silver hoops or bamboo hoops on the head and dark clothes without collar or sleeves. Because the clothes are short, bellies are often uncovered. They wear pail-form skirts that are decorated with silvery flowers and embroidered pictures in the different colors.

The Vas like rings, big rings and silvery hoops are especially for women. In addition, around their arms, waists and legs, there are many bamboo-strip rings. One ring is added up to show the age. But now it is only for decoration.





### **The dietetic customs—Pickled bamboo shoots and stewed rice with chicken**

The Va people mainly live on rice and millet, corn and red rice are their supplementary food. Traditional cookers are made of bamboo or wood. The bamboos are green and lush, and Bamboo shoots are among the Vas' main food. People, no matter rich or poor, like stewed food. They put rice, meat and vegetable together and stew them. Stewed chicken dish,

partridge soup and beef with Chinese cabbage are very famous and good for serving guests.



### **The full-of-action arts—The wooden drum dancing and hair dancing**

The Va people are very good at both dancing and singing. Local folk entertainment is rich and passionate. The Va dancing is featured for its rhythm and melody. Wooden drum dancing, killing bull dancing, hair dancing and rice pestling dancing are very famous, which express the straight-forward yet simple folkways.

### **The religions—The ghosts worship and cutting wood for drums**

In the past the Va people followed Animatism. Its primitive religion is "Libimeiyi". There are people who also believe in Buddhism and Christianity.

According to the Vas' traditional concepts, ghosts exist everywhere. Therefore, sacred ceremonies for ghosts should be held frequently. Cutting Wood for Drums is one of the religious ceremonies.



The Vas regard wooden drums as divine stuff that has special relationship with their gods. When such kind of ceremony is going on, people will beat the drums to let the gods know about it. There are several drum houses in each village. And new ones replace old drums annually. The ceremony is very complicated in terms of choosing the tree, bringing them into the village and processing them into drums. The whole process lasts for over ten days and in every step chicken and ox would be killed for sacrifice. Nowadays this ceremony has turned in a very important and grand festival of the Va people.

The Vas in the Ximeng area used to cut a head of someone to offer sacrifice to ghosts because they think that only if they do this would the grains grow well and would ghosts protect their villages. But such practice of head hunting has been abolished thoroughly now.