



Population in Myanmar:
770 (2025)

Location:
Shan State

Language Family:
Austro-Asiatic

Main Religion:
Animism (65.0%)

Christians:
150 (20.0%)

OVERVIEW

Population:
770 in Myanmar (2026 Asia Harvest)
700 (2012 SIL)

Other Countries:
93,000 in China

Other Names:
Ban, Kawa, K'awa, La, Meung Horn, Pan, Peung Sux, Pinyin, Pun, Va, Vax, Vhax, Vo, Wa Pwi, Wakut, Zhenkang Wa

Location:
Shan State: Hopang Township in the Wa Self-Administered Division

Language:
Wa, Vo [wbm]

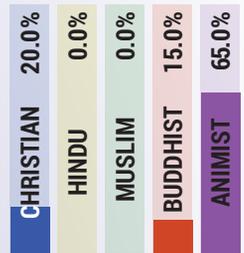
Dialects:

Scripture:
Bible 2012
Portions 2007

Jesus film:
Wa, Vo

Global Recordings:
Wa, Vo #86

People ID: 19401



Paul Hattaway

Location: Distinct from the large Parauk Wa group, the Vo Wa inhabit just five villages adjacent to the Chinese border in Myanmar's Hopang Township,¹ which is one of six townships comprised by the Wa Self-Administered Division. This division became part of the nominally independent Wa State in 2024, with its own political system and army.² The Burmese government lost control of the area after fighting a losing battle against the United Wa State Army for years. The area is a hotbed for drugs and other illegal trade. An estimated 93,000 Vo Wa people live across the border in China's Yunnan Province, where they dwell in villages at least 5,000 feet (1,524 meters) above sea level.

Identity: The Vo Wa in Myanmar have been profiled separately from the Parauk Wa because they speak a very different language. Although their autonym is "Vax," the Chinese have traditionally called them "Kawa," which means "Cut Wa" in reference to their

former headhunting ways. Today, most members of the tribe consider the name derogatory and prefer to simply be called Wa. In China, the government has combined three distinct language groups to form the official Wa minority. Although the Wa have lived in Myanmar for many centuries, British officers rarely ventured into what they called the "unadministered Wa States," as they were terrified of the Wa's penchant for cutting off heads. To protect themselves, Wa villages are virtual ramparts surrounded by six-foot (two-meter) high thickets of thorns and sharp sticks adorned by the heads of their enemies. Entrances to villages were via long, narrow tunnels through heavy doors that were controlled by villagers inside the rampart.

Language: The Vo Wa language is non-tonal and only partly intelligible with Parauk Wa. Lexical studies reveal the two Wa vernaculars are only 59% similar, meaning that only slightly more than half of their words come from

a common root. Although only 770 Vo people in Myanmar are said to speak their native language, the population of the ethnic and cultural group may be substantially higher. Similarly, in China only about half of Vo Wa people can still speak their language.

History: In China, the Vo Wa are considered a primitive and reclusive group. Between 1948 and 1950, a Wa man cut off five Han merchants' heads because of a business dispute. He then sold the heads for 300 Yuan for the beardless ones and 2,000 Yuan for those with a full beard.³ Incidents sometimes sparked a sequence of killings that would continue for generations. In 1936, when more than 100 households in the Ximeng Mountains were butchered by the Wa, "the booty of severed heads was transported back in the loaded saddlebags of eight cows."⁴

Customs: The Vo Wa people grow a variety of crops in their area, including rice, corn, and maize. Hopang Township contains 3,700 acres of rubber plantations, which provide a legitimate income to many families.

Religion: For centuries the Wa engaged in headhunting to appease demons and ensure a bountiful harvest. One writer summarized their spiritual condition: "They exist in constant fear: fear of demons, fear of government officials, fear of landlords, fear of hostile tribes, and even fear of their own evil souls. The ghostly and bloodcurdling practices they developed to assuage their fears only resulted in further exacerbating them."⁵

Christianity: Although Christianity found fertile soil among many Parauk Wa communities, the Vo Wa proved more difficult to reach on both sides of the border. In 1957, 97 villages in China had 59,493 Kawa inhabitants, but no Christians were recorded.⁶ The *Jesus* film has been produced in the Vo Wa language, and the full Bible was published in 2012, although the majority of Vo Wa families continue to observe the animistic rituals of their forefathers.