

Khmer



Population	12,750,000
Major Religion	Buddhism
Language	Khmer
Percent Christian	1-2%
Bible Translation	Yes



Who are the Khmer?

The Khmer are one of the oldest population groups in Indochina, occupying of the Mekong valley and fertile plains, from modern day northeast Thailand to southern Vietnam. The Khmer language is related to many languages spoken by hilltribe peoples of Laos and Vietnam, but is very different from Thai or Lao. Khmer people constitute about 90% of Cambodia's 14.2 million people. There are also millions of Khmer still living in Thailand and Vietnam.

What are their lives like?

The Khmer developed a highly sophisticated culture that dominated the entire Indochinese peninsula by the 10th century A.D. The flowering of Khmer culture is embodied in Angkor Wat, a temple complex built in the 12th century. Today this temple is the national symbol of Cambodia.

Years of war and brutal killings have so skewed traditional morality and trust that the family unit is suffering. The children, forced into independence too quickly, see little need for parental authority. Likewise, due to years of separation, many wives have lost trust in their husbands.

Only 20% of Cambodia is urban. Most Khmer live in raised wooden houses on family farms. Villagers share in harvest and other heavy tasks. The Khmer are primarily engaged in agricultural activities and rice is the main crop grown. The land has become increasingly devastated due to years of war, massacres, political isolation and socialist bureaucracy.

The devastating effect of the Khmer Rouge caused unprecedented suffering for Khmer people, along with the rest of Cambodian society. The effects of the tragedy are still felt in Khmer life.

What do they believe?

During the empire of Angkor, the reigning monarch was identified with Siva, king of Hindu gods. In the 13th century, Theravada Buddhism undermined the prestige of kings and priests and eventually in 1432, the Angkor Empire fell. Theravada Buddhism remained the dominant and unchallenged faith until 1975. During Pol Pot's regime, 90% of all Buddhist monks were killed. In 1989, the Hun Sen government re-introduced Buddhism as the national religion. Today more than 94% of the population is Buddhist. Cambodian Buddhism is an easy-going faith and tolerates ancestor and spirit worship.

Christianity made little impact on the Khmer until the early 1970s when revival broke out. Church growth was phenomenal for three years but was halted by the communist takeover in 1975. Ten thousand Christians were killed during the Pol Pot regime, and less than 1,000 survived.

Freedom of religion was made a constitutional right in 1990. Since 1996, Protestant Christianity has doubled in size every two years. It is now estimated that there may be 260,000 believers among the Khmer.

What are their needs?

Even though the Gospel has made great strides in recent years, less than 2% of Khmer people have faith in Jesus. Millions are still without Christ. Among believers, there is a great need for discipleship and leadership training as well as wisdom about how to best reach more Khmer.