

Approximately 1,000 Gongduk people live in a few extremely isolated villages in Bhutan's Mongar District. Nothing was known about this small ethnic group until the Dutch linguist George van Driem discovered them in 1991. Van Driem wrote, 'The Gongduk language is spoken by a dwindling population in a remote enclave along the Kurichu [River] in east-central Bhutan. . . . In May of 1991, I discovered this previously unknown language in a remote portion of Mongar District, where I was conducting a linguistic survey of the country in the serve of the Royal Government of Bhutan. . . . Gongduk can be reached on foot from Jephzh'ing, from which it is two or three days' journey to the south. It is also about a two days' journey up from the Manas River in the plains. This accounts for the fact that the Gongduk have remained largely unknown outside of the Gongduk area itself and its immediate environs.'¹

As van Driem studied Gongduk, he excitedly realized that he had found a unique language that appears to be the sole representative of a branch of the Tibeto-Burman family.² Another source has said that Gongduk 'retains

the complex verbal agreement system of Proto Tibeto-Burman. It is said to belong to one of the ancient populations of Bhutan.'³ Part of the reason the Gongduk remained undiscovered for so long is because the people pass themselves off as Kheng when they meet outsiders. Just why they do this is uncertain, as they have their own

unique culture and language that is not mutually intelligible with Kheng. Van Driem further notes, 'There are currently just over a thousand speakers of the Gongduk language. According to one legend Gongduk was once long ago a small independent kingdom. The Gongduk themselves repeat that they are of aboriginal Dung lineage, or Dungjüt, and that their ancestors were semi-nomadic hunters.'⁴ In these respects they are similar to the Lhokpu people of Bhutan.⁵

One has to wonder how many other small tribes and language groups exist in the hundreds of isolated valleys of the Himalayan Range. The Gongduk may have been one of the earliest people groups in Bhutan, but for uncertain historical reasons they were driven to their present location centuries ago. Bhutan was completely closed off to outside influence for centuries

until 1960, when the king allowed more freedom.⁶ Little has changed in rural areas of the nation for centuries. When the Earl of Ronaldshay entered Bhutan in 1921 he reported, 'With our passage through the bridge, behold a curious transformation. For just as Alice, when she walked through the looking-glass, found herself in a new and whimsical world, so we found ourselves, as though caught up in some magic time machine fitted fantastically with a reverse, flung back across the centuries

into the feudalism of a mediaeval age.'⁷

The religious belief of the Gongduk is Tibetan Buddhism mixed with animistic spirit worship. Throughout two thousand years of Christianity, the good news that Jesus Christ died for the sins of the world has never once entered the remote enclave inhabited by the Gongduk.



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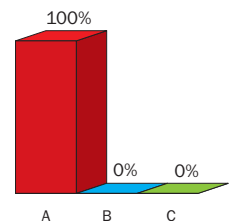


Population:
2,500 (2000)
3,200 (2010)
4,100 (2020)
Countries: Bhutan
Buddhism: Tibetan
Christians: none known

Overview of the Gongduk

Other Names: Gongdukpa, Gongdubikha, Gongdupkha
Population Sources: 2,000 in Bhutan (2001, G van Driem [1991 figure])
Language: Sino-Tibetan, Tibeto-Burman, Himalayish, Tibeto-Kanauri, Tibetic, Tibetan
Dialects: 0
Professing Buddhists: 100%
Practising Buddhists: 70%
Christians: 0%
Scripture: none
Jesus film: none
Gospel Recordings: none
Christian Broadcasting: none
ROPAL code: GOE

Status of Evangelization



A = Have never heard the gospel
B = Have heard the gospel but have not become Christians
C = Are adherents to some form of Christianity