

Kheng

A 1991 source listed a population of 40,000 Kheng people living in south-central Bhutan.¹ It is the most widely spoken of the Eastern Tibetan languages in Bhutan. The Kheng inhabit a widespread area in the south-central part of the kingdom, concentrated in Zhamgang District and western Mongar District. Zhamgang was once a collection of tiny principalities that were absorbed into Bhutan in the 17th century. One source gives specific details regarding the distribution of the Kheng: 'Near Zhamgang, the northernmost Kheng speaking village is Wangdugang on the Mangdechu [River]. Around Zhamgang the Mangdechu forms the boundary between

Bumthang, and just 47 per cent with Dzongkha (the national language of Bhutan).³ George van Driem says, 'Although it could be argued that the two languages Kheng and Kurtop are dialects of Bumthang on grounds of mutual intelligibility, there are essential differences between the phonologies of Kheng and Kurtop on one hand and that of Bumthang on the other. Moreover, the speakers of these three languages identify strongly with their respective homelands in Bumthang, Kurto and Kheng. . . . The district capital of Kheng is Zhamgang proper. It has three dialects, all of which have significant differences. Within the vast Kheng area there is considerable



Population:
50,200 (2000)
64,400 (2010)
82,600 (2020)
Countries: Bhutan
Buddhism: Tibetan
Christians: 50



dialect diversity, both lexically and in the way certain tenses are formed. The differences between the individual Kheng

dialects are in some cases as great as the difference between any one of these and a given dialect of Bumthang.⁴

the Kheng and Nyenkha speaking areas. South of the village of Takma, however, Kheng is spoken on both sides of the Mangdechu. In the east, the Kurichu River forms the boundary between the Kheng and Tsangla speaking areas. As one crosses the high mountain ridge traveling south from Zhamgang on the main road, one enters Nepali speaking territory.²

Tibetan Buddhism is the professed religion of the Kheng, although the pre-Buddhist religion of Bon also yields great influence. 'The Bon religion is widespread throughout Kheng, where it is practiced in syncretic coexistence with Buddhism, and there is a panoply of different local traditions.'⁵ One expert on Tibetan Buddhism noted, 'When tantric Buddhism entered Tibet . . . it began a centuries-long battle with Tibet's native shamanism. In the end, tantric Buddhism prevailed only by absorbing much shamanist practice, and the shamanists survived by adopting a thin veneer of Buddhism.'⁶

In the early 1990s, the first Kheng people believed in Christ. Today there is a small group of believers, struggling to establish the Christian faith among this unreached people group.

The southernmost areas inhabited by the Kheng are off-limits to foreign travellers, because of the threat posed by separatist groups across the border in the Indian State of Assam. Several guerilla groups there have been waging a war against Indian rule, and senseless acts of violence are commonplace.

The Kheng language is part of the Eastern Tibetan branch of Tibeto-Burman. It is closely related to, yet distinct from, Bumthang and Kurtop. Kheng reportedly has 92 per cent lexical similarity with

Overview of the Kheng

Other Names: Khengkha, Khenkha, Khen, Keng, Ken
Population Sources: 40,000 in Bhutan (2001, G van Driem [1991 figure])
Language: Sino-Tibetan, Tibeto-Burman, Himalayish, Tibeto-Kanauri, Tibetic, Tibetan, Eastern
Dialects: 3 (Pchikor, Nangkor, Tamacho)
Professing Buddhists: 95%
Practising Buddhists: 65%
Christians: 0.1%
Scripture: none
Jesus film: none
Gospel Recordings: none
Christian Broadcasting: none
ROPAL code: XKFG

