

# Kurtop



**Population:**

12,500 (2000)  
16,100 (2010)  
20,600 (2020)

**Countries:** Bhutan

**Buddhism:** Tibetan

**Christians:** none known

## Overview of the Kurtop

**Other Names:** Kurtopa, Kurtokha, Gurtü, Kurtopakha, Kurthopka, Kurteopkha, Kurthopkha, Kurtobikha, Kurtobi Zhake

**Population Sources:**

10,000 in Bhutan (2001, G van Driem [1991 figure])

**Language:** Sino-Tibetan, Tibeto-Burman, Himalayish, Tibeto-Kanauri, Tibetic, Tibetan, Eastern

**Dialects:** 1 (Tangmachu)

**Professing Buddhists:** 100%

**Practising Buddhists:** 75%

**Christians:** 0%

**Scripture:** none

**Jesus film:** none

**Gospel Recordings:** none

**Christian Broadcasting:** none

**ROPAL code:** XKZ

More than 10,000 Kurtop people inhabit areas of northern Bhutan, as far north as the border with China. Lhuntse District is home to the Kurtop. One scholar has given a detailed description of the extent of the Kurtop territory: 'Kurtop is a language of Lhuntse District spoken to the west of the mighty Kurichu [River] all the way to the Tibetan border in the north. The language is known to its speakers by the names *Kurtökha* and *Kurtöbi Zhakê*. . .

At the southern end, the Kurtop speaking area begins at the village of Tangmachu, south of which Chocangacakha [Matpa] is spoken. The dialect of Tangmachu, located about 5 kilometres [three miles] south of Lhuntse, as the crow flies, differs somewhat from that of the rest of the language as it is spoken elsewhere in Kurto. . . The Kurichu River separates the Kurto and the Dzala language areas in the east. In the west the Bumthang area begins as one crosses the mountains via the Rodungla.<sup>1</sup>

Lhuntse District is extremely isolated. As recently as 1998 one book noted, 'It is very rural and there are fewer than five vehicles, including the ambulance, and not a single petrol station in the whole district. Formerly known as Kurtoe, the region is the ancestral home of Bhutan's royal family. Though geographically in the east, it was culturally identified with central Bhutan, and the high route over Rodang La was a major trade route until the road to Mongar was completed.'<sup>2</sup>

Regarding the actual township of Lhuntse, it has been reported, 'There is little to see and do here, but the *dzong* (fort-monastery) is one of the most picturesque in Bhutan.



Dwayne Graybill

There are a few food shops and food stalls along the road as it enters the town.<sup>3</sup> Lhuntse is famous in Bhutan for its weaving, embroidery and basket-making. There is no large-scale industry here, but many families earn their livelihood by weaving in their homes.

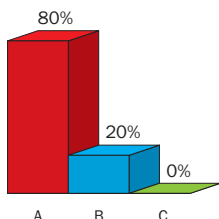
A two-day walk from Lhuntse up the Kurichu River is the Kurtop village of Dungkhar. Bhutan's royal family, the Wangchuks, trace their ancestry

from here. Jigme Namgyal, the father of the first king, was born here in 1825. This fact, understandably, is a cause of great pride among the people in this remote outpost.

Although many Westerners seem to believe the myth that the Buddhist peoples of the world live in perfect peace and harmony with one another, this part of Bhutan has witnessed much death and mayhem during repeated Tibetan invasions. The fifth Dalai Lama 'became jealous of the growing influence of the rival Drukpas on his southern border and mounted further invasions into Bhutan in 1648 and 1649. . . They were repelled, and the Bhutanese captured large amounts of armor, weapons and other spoils.'<sup>4</sup>

Tibetan Buddhism dominates the lives of all people in this part of Bhutan. It is considered a great honour for a family to send its sons to the monastery for a time. The name of Jesus Christ has rarely been heard in the remote Lhuntse valleys, and there are no known Christians among the Kurtop people.

## 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