

More than 25,000 Matpa people are concentrated in the lower areas of Mongar District in eastern Bhutan. Their two largest villages are Tsamang and Tsakaling. A number of Matpa villages are also located within the Lhuntse District further to the north, especially in and around the village of Kurmet.

Matpa is the ethnic name of this group. They have also been listed by their language name, Chocangacakha, which is closely related to Dzongkha, Bhutan's national language spoken by the Drukpa people.

All Matpa people are followers of Tibetan Buddhism.

Despite being a tiny country with one of the smallest populations of any country in the world, 'Bhutan has an enormous number of religious buildings. According to one count, 525 *Ihakhangs* [temples] are owned by the state and another 144 are in the care of reincarnate lamas. In addition, there are another 800 village temples and an estimated 500 privately-owned temples. Each was designed for a different purpose to suit the wishes of the founders, architects or sponsors.'<sup>1</sup> Given that realistic estimates put Bhutan's population at around 600,000, that means there is an average of one Buddhist temple for every 300 people in Bhutan.

The question of Bhutan's population is one of the strangest demographic inconsistencies in the world. Figures given by respected publications range from 600,000 to more than two million. One book, printed in

1998, explains the history behind this odd situation: 'In 1971, when Bhutan applied for UN membership, the population was estimated at just less than one million. No census data existed and government officials estimated the population as best they could, choosing to err on the high side

in order to help gain world recognition. Over the years, this nearly-a-million-figure was adjusted upward in accordance with estimates of Bhutan's population growth figures, finally reaching the 1.2 million figure. In some publications, this total was even listed at 1.5 million! The 600,000 estimate is based on the census of 1988 and is now the accepted figure.'<sup>2</sup>

Being an official Buddhist kingdom, Bhutan has been largely locked away from the influence of the gospel for centuries until recent decades, when migrants from Nepal and India have brought Christianity into the

country for the first time on any significant scale. The Buddhist groups, however, have remained largely untouched by the gospel. They see Christianity as a foreign religion with little relevance to their lives. Others see Christianity as a threat to traditional Bhutanese values and culture.<sup>3</sup>

The importance of Tibetan Buddhism and the unity that it fosters are best seen among the Matpa people during festivals and ceremonies. The whole community attends, dressed in their festive best. Participants wear gruesome masks depicting powerful demons, and stories are told of how the Buddhist sage Padmasambhava defeated demonic forces with the truth of Buddhism. There are no known Christians and no Scripture translations, *Jesus* film or gospel recordings are available in their language.



Dwayne Graybill



**Population:**  
25,100 (2000)  
32,200 (2010)  
41,300 (2020)  
**Countries:** Bhutan  
**Buddhism:** Tibetan  
**Christians:** none known

## Overview of the Matpa

**Other Names:** Chocangacakha, Tsamangpakha, Tsakalingpaikha, Maphekha, Rtsamangpa'ikha, Kursmadkha

**Population Sources:**

20,000 in Bhutan (2001, G van Driem [1991 figure])

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

**Dialects:** 0

**Professing Buddhists:** 100%

**Practising Buddhists:** 85%

**Christians:** 0%

**Scripture:** none

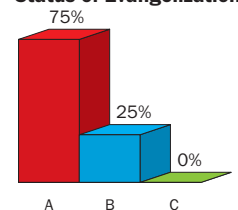
**Jesus film:** none

**Gospel Recordings:** none

**Christian Broadcasting:** none

**ROPAL code:** CHK

## 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