



Population:

630 (2000)
800 (2010)
1,000 (2020)

Countries: Bhutan

Buddhism: Tibetan

Christians: none known

Overview of the Ole

Other Names: Olekha, Ole Monpa, Monkha, Black Mountain

Population Sources:

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

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

Dialects: 3 (Ole, Southern, Northern)

Professing Buddhists: 100%

Practising Buddhists: 55%

Christians: 0%

Scripture: none

Jesus film: none

Gospel Recordings: none

Christian Broadcasting: none

ROPAL code: OLE

A remote area of central Bhutan is home to a small ethnic group called Ole. They inhabit the south-eastern part of Bhutan's Wangdue Phodrang District, within the aptly named Black Mountains. The Ole inhabit seven villages in all, comprising 86 households with an estimated population of about 500 individuals.¹ The Black Mountains are a 'southern spur of the Himalayas, which runs from north to south over a distance of some 200 km [123 miles], separating western from central Bhutan. The range was so called by the British because of its dense forest cover and its formidable and precipitous, dark escarpments.²

The highest peak in the area, Mount Jod'ushingphu, is a sacred mountain to the Ole. The Black Mountains are home to many rare animal and bird species, including the serow, the great-pied hornbill and the rare golden langur.

The ethnic name of this group differs depending on the location and name of their local clan. Linguist George van Driem was the first scholar to study this small group. He decided to simply call their language 'Black Mountain' after the region they inhabit. Van Driem explains, 'Their language is known as *Monkha* . . . although those living in Rukha village are wont to call their language *Olekha* "the Ole language" after the local clan name. Strictly speaking, it is correct only to refer to the Black Mountain dialect spoken in Rukha and Riti as *Olekha*. . . I use the term Black Mountain Monpa or just Black Mountain to distinguish this group from

the other ethnolinguistic groups in the eastern Himalayan region which designate themselves as "Monpa".³

It seems that the Ole's homeland once lay further south than its present position. They may have been pushed northward by the sudden influx of Nepali people into southern Bhutan. The Ole language has baffled and thrilled linguists, who see it as an extremely rare archaic language that has managed to survive to the present day. One scholar notes, 'The Ole represented the old vanguard of the ancient East Bodish

population, separated from the remaining East Bodish groups at an early period, and lived beyond the range of Tibetan cultural influence. In contrast to other East Bodish language communities, the original Ole style of housing is not Bhutanese, nor were their native religious practices Buddhist.⁴

Since the time they migrated into the Buddhist regions of central Bhutan,

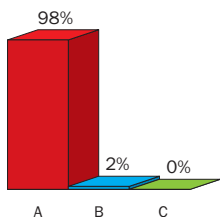
the Ole have gradually adopted a veneer of Buddhism. Today they all profess to be Buddhists, but in reality they have merely added this religion to their centuries-old shamanistic rituals and beliefs. It is not Buddhist monks who preside over Ole religious ceremonies, but rather Bon male and female shamans. They have 'also retained and incorporated native animist religious practices. The Ole of Rukha still avoid eating goat's meat or mutton, thus observing the very same dietetic taboo as many Rai peoples of eastern Nepal.'⁵

Christianity has yet to make any impact upon this small and fascinating people group.



Dwayne Graybill

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