

Khmer Keh



Population	5,222
Major Religion	Animism
Language	Khmer Keh
Percent Christian	1%
Bible Translation	Yes



Who are the Khmer Keh?

The Khmer Keh are a minority group of Khmer people living in 8 villages in the northeastern part of Cambodia. Legend tells that hundreds of years ago a crocodile caught the daughter of the king. The citizens went after the crocodile, but could not catch it. Because they were afraid to go back, they settled in different villages. They were called Khmer Khac which later changed to Khmer Keh. Some also went to the Thai border. The Khmer there are northern Khmer, or Khmer Surin.

They speak their own dialect of Khmer, which is mixed with Lao and very similar to Khmer Surin. Apart from their dialect and darker skin there is little difference from other Khmer. They relate and intermarry with the rest of the population.

What are their lives like?

Most of the Khmer Keh are subsistence rice farmers. Some people raise chickens or pigs and they also catch fish and frogs. There is no tradition of growing vegetables or fruit. There is great dependence on food that grows naturally in the forest. Change is slowly coming through a development program encouraging vegetable gardens.

Their wooden houses are built on stilts, with low roofs, like the Lao houses, traditionally made of straw, now mostly with iron. The women usually dress with a sarong and a shirt or blouse, men with trousers or a *kroma*. They used to weave and make their own cloth, but now they buy all in the district capital. Some now also have motorbikes and even mobile phones.

There are schools in their villages, but some children cannot go to school because of distance or

family work needs. Education is very basic. Reading is rather difficult for them. The girls are married at the age of 15 to 17 years or even younger. If a girl is over twenty, nobody wants to marry her any more.

What do they believe?

The Khmer Keh are mostly animistic with Buddhist influence. Once a year, there is a ceremony where the spirit medium performs special dances to receive the spirits. The followers come to offer things like eggs, chicken, alcohol, money, *kroma* or material for a skirt. When they are sick they either go to the medium, who will tell them the cause of the sickness and what they should offer, or they go to the *Kru Khmer* (traditional healer).

Young people today often do not have such a strong belief in these spirits as their ancestors.

What are their needs?

The Khmer Keh are very dependent on rice planting for survival. Those who do not get enough harvest to feed their families have to borrow rice at high interest rates.

There has not been much exposure to the outside world, but the district is beginning to open up as accessibility gets better. This type of outside contact is new and the Khmer Keh are very vulnerable to any kind of influence. In some villages there are groups of Christians, but they are still very young in their faith. The leaders are simple people with servant hearts, but have only very basic education and not much training. Pray that the believers can grow and mature in their faith and understanding of the Word of God. They also need more teaching and training.