

Khmer, Northern



Population	1,250,000 (mainly in Thailand)
Major Religion	Buddhism
Language	Khmer, Northern
Percent Christian	Less than 1%
Bible Translation	Yes



Who are the Northern Khmer?

The Northern Khmer are mostly found in the lower northeast of Thailand, in the provinces of Buriram, Surin and Sisaket, which border Cambodia. They are also known as Thai-Khmer or Khmer-Surin. Northern Khmer speakers are also found in villages along the Thai-Cambodian border in the Prachinburi province. They number approximately 1.25 million people in Thailand with possibly 3,000 - 5,000 Christians among them. The dialect of Khmer spoken in Cambodia across the north is very similar to the dialect in Thailand, though in Thailand many Thai words are also used.

The Khmer have been in the lower northeast of present-day Thailand even longer than the Thai. There are many Khmer ruins dating from the pre-Angkor and the Angkor period in the three provinces and beyond, notably at Phanomrung (Buriram), still with concentrations of Khmer-speaking communities nearby.

A linguistic survey carried out in the 1960s discovered that Buriram province was approximately 75% Khmer-speaking, Surin 90% and Sisaket 70%. These figures may have changed since then, but the broad coverage of the language can still be found in each of the provinces.

In Thailand, many Khmer are migrant laborers, especially in the dry season, and can be found on construction sites in Bangkok and in fruit and sugarcane plantations in other parts of the country. Many of the young people from the region are now working in factories in and around Greater Bangkok.

What are their lives like?

The Northern Khmer are traditionally rice farmers, following the rhythm of the monsoon

which can be notoriously fickle, with one village able to plant crops while another suffers drought. They are also skilled timber-cutters and house builders, and many Khmer women weave silk and cotton cloth during the dry season. Due to lack of ground water, only small-scale agriculture is possible, apart from raising cattle or buffaloes.

Their food is distinctively Khmer with the popular *somlor* (soup) and liberal use of *prohok*. Music is also very much part of their culture with the Khmer violin and *pleng kantrum* (Khmer folksong) at the centre of village life and celebrations. They dress much like the Thai, but with distinctive colors and patterns in their sarongs.

What do they believe?

Outwardly they are followers of the Thai national religion of Theravada Buddhism, with a strong admixture of spirit-worship and divination which is performed by the *kruu*, who may be either a monk or a layman. The Khmer are known (and sometimes feared) within Thailand for their powers of witchcraft and sorcery. As well as Buddhist festivals, they also hold a festival to the spirits of the dead known as *Prachum Ben*. Most Khmer houses have a spirit-shelf near the house, and another inside the house with items placed there by the *khruu*.

What are their needs?

In Thailand, the Northern Khmer come at the bottom of educational success, and alcoholism among both men and women is a major problem in many families. Their greatest need is to hear the Gospel presented in a way they can understand.