

Location: Approximately 100 families of the Keriya tribe live “at the southeastern edge of the great Taklimakan Desert... in a green corridor that extends sporadically into the depths of the desert.”¹ The largest Keriya community is Tangzubast Village, about 300 kilometers (185 mi.) north of the town of Yutian, in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region. Tangzubast has been placed under the jurisdiction of Liuabuyi Township in Yutian County. The only way for travelers to visit the area is to follow the dry Keriya River bed north, as there are no roads. *The Record of Buddhist Countries*, written by a fourth century pilgrim, described the Taklimakan Desert: “Monstrous heat-waves are frequent in the desert. Coming across such a phenomena means inevitable death. No birds can be seen in the sky nor animals on the ground. The only things to catch the eye are skeletons which mark the trail of travelers.”

Identity: The Keriya have been officially counted as part of the Uygur nationality in China. Although they now speak Uygur as their own language, they claim to be descended from the Gug tribe who fled into the desert centuries ago to escape the attacking Ladakhis from Kashmir.

Language: The Keriya once had their own language, but today they speak only the Yutian Uygur language.

History: After they were attacked by the Ladakhis, “a small number of Gug people crossed the Kunlun Mountains

and settled in the Keriya River valley, where they reclaimed land, hunted and herded animals and lived a self-sufficient life until today.”² The Keriya live on the ruins of the ancient city of Keladun, which is now buried beneath the sand. Archaeologists have found items of pottery dated from the Han Dynasty (206 BC – AD 220). Ruins of twenty similar cities are found throughout the desert. The Keriya people were first “discovered” by Swedish explorer Svan Anders von Hedin in 1896 after he had traveled 12 days into the desert, following the Keriya River. It recently dried up after a sudden change in course and can no longer be followed.

Customs: The Keriya live in widely scattered communities. When there is a wedding or other celebration, “the invitation is written on a slip of paper and passed from family to family, which usually takes a fortnight to do the rounds.”³ Most Keriya families herd goats and sheep. Many also raise camels, horses, and donkeys. Mutton pancakes, called *somitikubaxi*, are the main staple of the Keriya’s diet.



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Religion: The Keriya have embraced the Sunni Islamic beliefs of most of the people groups in Xinjiang. They do not have their own mosques but are careful to observe all Muslim rules and regulations.

Christianity: The hidden Keriya people have never heard the gospel. They present a significant physical challenge for any would-be evangelist who must venture deep into the awesome and hostile Taklimakan Desert to reach these precious souls. *Taklimakan* is a Turkic word which means “many go in, but few come out.” Summer temperatures in the area frequently rise to over 50° Celsius (122°F).



Population in China:
600 (1996)
660 (2000)
830 (2010)
Location: Xinjiang
Religion: Islam
Christians: None Known

Overview of the Keriya

Countries: China
Pronunciation: “Kerr-yah”
Other Names: Keriya Uygurs
Population Source:
600 (1996 AMO);
100 families
(1996 *China Tourism*);
Out of a total Uygur population of
7,214,431 (1990 census)
Location:
S Xinjiang: Yutian County

Status:
Officially included under Uygur
Language:
Altaic, Turkic, Eastern Turkic
Dialects: 0
Religion: Sunni Islam
Christians: None known
Scripture: None
Jesus film: None
Gospel Recordings: None
Christian Broadcasting: None
ROPAL code: None

