

Location: A 1987 linguistic study listed 91,000 speakers of the Northern Khampa Tibetan language.¹ They occupy the large, sparsely populated Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in southern Qinghai Province. Northern Khampa is spoken as far north as the 5,214-meter-high (17,100 ft.) Mount Yagradagze. In addition, a small number of Northern Khampa spill over the border into northeast Tibet. The nomadic Northern Khampa live on a high plateau where they herd sheep, goats, and yaks.²

Identity: The Northern Khampa are part of the Tibetan nationality in China. Anthropologist Michael Peissel described them in 1964: "The Khampas stood a good six feet in height ... wore great heavy boots and flowing khaki robes that flapped like whips as they walked, advancing with their feet slightly apart as if to trample the grass to extinction.... Unlike Tibetans of Lhasa, their features were not Mongoloid, but straight, with large fierce eyes set beside beak-like noses, and long hair braided and wound around their heads, giving them a primitive allure."³

Language: Northern Khampa is one of three Khampa groups, "each speaking its own language and living in different areas. Due to the migration of peoples and the many political developments, Tibet has become very ethnically complex."⁴

History: Heinrich Harrier, famous for his book *Seven Years in Tibet*, walked

through Khampa areas in the 1940s. Harrier described the Khampa: "They live in groups in three or four tents which serve as headquarters for their campaigns.... Heavily armed with rifles and swords they force their way into a nomad's tent and insist on hospitable entertainment on the most lavish scale available. The nomad in terror brings out everything he has. The Khampas fill their bellies and their pockets and, taking a few cattle with them for good measure, disappear into the wide-open spaces. They repeat the performance at another tent every day till the whole region has been skinned.... Stories were told of the cruelty with which they sometimes put their victims to death. They go so far as to slaughter pilgrims and wandering monks and nuns."⁵

Customs: Khampa men are easily identifiable by the red and black tassels braided into their hair. They say that they wear this to protect their scalps during knife fights. Khampa superstition says a man without an earring will be reincarnated as a donkey. Turquoise, red coral, bone,



Luke Kuepfer

and silver ornaments decorate nomad Khampa women's hair.

Religion: Although they profess to be Buddhists, the Khampa nomads' religion is little more than a crude imitation of the ideals of the pure form of Buddhism.

Christianity: Two thousand years since the birth of Christ, the Northern Khampa remain completely untouched by the gospel. They are separated by geographic, linguistic, cultural, and religious barriers. There has never been any kind of church or Christian witness in the extremely isolated and practically impenetrable Yushu Prefecture.



Population in China:

91,000 (1987)
118,400 (2000)
145,900 (2010)

Location: Qinghai, Tibet
Religion: Tibetan Buddhism
Christians: None Known

Overview of the Northern Khampa

Countries: China
Pronunciation: "Kum-ba"
Other Names: Kham, Khamba
Population Source: 91,000 (1987 LAC); Out of a total Tibetan population of 4,593,330 (1990 census)
Location: S Qinghai: Yushu Prefecture; NE Tibet
Status: Officially included under Tibetan

Language: Sino-Tibetan, Tibeto-Burman, Bodic, Bodish, Tibetan, Northern Tibetan
Dialects (4): Bristod, Khrihdu, Kuergu, Nagnchen
Religion: Tibetan Buddhism
Christians: None known
Scripture: Tibetan Bible 1948; New Testament 1885; Portions 1862
Jesus film: None
Gospel Recordings: None
Christian Broadcasting: None
ROPAL code: KHG04

