

# Khampa, Northern



**Population:**

118,400 (2000)  
145,900 (2010)  
179,700 (2020)

**Countries:** China

**Buddhism:** Tibetan

**Christians:** none known

## Overview of the Northern Khampa

**Other Names:** Kham, Khamba

**Population Sources:**

91,000 in China (1987, *Language Atlas of China*)

**Language:** Sino-Tibetan, Tibeto-Burman, Himalayish, Tibeto-Kanauri, Tibetic, Tibetan, Northern

**Dialects:** 4 (Bristod, Khrihdu, Kuergu, Nagnchen)

**Professing Buddhists:** 100%

**Practising Buddhists:** 65%

**Christians:** 0%

**Scripture:** Tibetan Bible 1948; New Testament 1885; Portions 1862

**Jesus film:** none

**Gospel Recordings:** none

**Christian Broadcasting:** none

**ROPAL code:** KHG04

A 1987 linguistic study listed 91,000 speakers of the Northern Khampa Tibetan language in China.<sup>1</sup> 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-metre (17,100 ft.) Mount Yagradagze. In addition, a small number of Northern Khampa live over the border in north-east Tibet. The nomadic Northern Khampa live on a high plateau where they herd sheep, goats and yaks.<sup>2</sup>

Northern Khampa is one of four 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.'<sup>3</sup> Anthropologist Michael Peissel described the Khampa in 1964: 'The Khampas stood a good



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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.'<sup>4</sup> Khampa men are easily identifiable by the red and black tassels braided into their hair. They say that they wear these to protect their scalps during knife fights. Khampa superstition says that a man without an earring will be reincarnated as a donkey. Turquoise, red coral, bone and silver ornaments decorate

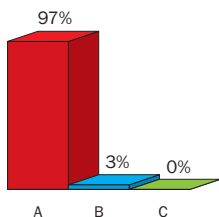
the hair of the nomad Khampa women. Heinrich Harrier, famous for his book *Seven Years in Tibet*, walked through Khampa areas in the 1940s. Harrier described the lawlessness and terror that the common people lived under: 'They live in groups in three or four tents which serve as headquarters for their 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.'<sup>5</sup>

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. There are few temples or monasteries in this part of the Tibetan world, yet the Northern Khampa still consider themselves believers in Buddha and would not consider any other way. Two thousand years after the birth of Christ, the Northern Khampa remain almost completely untouched by the gospel. Geographic, linguistic, cultural and religious barriers separate them. There has never been any kind of church or lasting Christian witness in this extremely isolated and practically impenetrable Yushu Prefecture.

## 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