

# Sherdukpen



**Population:**

3,040 (2000)  
3,540 (2010)  
4,130 (2020)

**Countries:** India  
**Buddhism:** Tibetan  
**Christians:** 20

**Overview of the Sherdukpen**

**Other Names:** Ngnok  
**Population Sources:** 2,952 in India (1991 census)  
**Language:** Sino-Tibetan, Tibeto-Burman, Himalayish, Tibeto-Kanauri, Tibetic, Tibetan, Unclassified  
**Dialects:** 2 (Thungjee Ngnok, Sanjee Ngook)  
**Professing Buddhists:** 98%  
**Practising Buddhists:** 90%  
**Christians:** 0.7%  
**Scripture:** none  
**Jesus film:** none  
**Gospel Recordings:** none  
**Christian Broadcasting:** none  
**ROPAL code:** SDP

Approximately 3,000 Sherdukpen people inhabit the Bomdila Subdivision of the West Kameng District of Arunachal Pradesh in north-east India. The three main villages are Rupa,<sup>1</sup> Shergaon and Jigaon. The 1971 census figure returned 1,635 Sherdukpen. This increased to 2,096 by the 1981

census and to 2,952 in 1991. A small number of Sherdukpen have moved down to the Assam plains.

The Sherdukpen language is part of the Kanauri branch of the Tibeto-Burman family. There are dialect differences between the Sherdukpen spoken in different villages. The dialect spoken by the inhabitants of Rupa village is called Thungjee Ngnok, while the other main dialect is called Sanjee Ngook.<sup>2</sup> The Sherdukpen culture and language are strange in that they are quite distinct from the other Tibeto-Burman varieties in Arunachal Pradesh. This suggests that this group migrated into the area from far away.

The Sherdukpen's oral history says that 'they originated from the marriage of a Tibetan prince with a princess of Assam, possibly of Kachari origin'.<sup>3</sup> Some scholars have thought that the Sherdukpen and some of the Monpa living in the Kameng District originated in eastern Bhutan because of the many cultural similarities that these groups share. Today, visitors to the region can easily identify the Sherdukpen because their dress is totally different from that of other peoples. The men's dress consists of a shawl, waist belt, jacket and a cap made of yak's hair. The Sherdukpen women wear a white cotton or silk gown called a *sinka*.

Buddhism first came to the Sherdukpen in the mid-1700s. The strength of Buddhist belief among this group can be seen from figures returned in the 1981 census, when 2,087 out of the 2,096 Sherdukpen people declared themselves Buddhists. The remaining nine individuals included a

few who said they were Hindus, and some who filled their form out incorrectly!

The Buddhist lamas, known as *chize*, double as shaman priests among the Sherdukpen. They perform weddings and funerals and act as mediators between the spirit world and the community. Before a wedding can take place, a suitable bride price must be negotiated between the families of the bride and groom. The groom's

family must come up with an acceptable form of payment to compensate the bride's family for all the years of expense and effort they spent in raising the girl. Traditionally, the bride price is 'two sheep, two yaks and a piece of *endi* cloth [a shawl]. . . . The most common form of marriage is a negotiated arranged one. The parents of both the boy and the girl arrange the marriage. The girl is ritually eloped by the boy's parents and their relatives. These days love marriages are increasing in number.<sup>4</sup> After the bride price has been settled, a Buddhist lama is called in to consult the horoscopes to determine the best time and day for the wedding to take place.<sup>5</sup>

For countless centuries the Sherdukpen people, few in number yet unique, lived and died without any knowledge of the gospel. The 1991 census returned just 13 Sherdukpen people who declared themselves as Christians.



Dwayne Graybill

