

Approximately 12 million Khmer people live throughout the world today. They are the predominant ethnic group in the nation of Cambodia, where they number 9.3 million (83% of the population). More than 1.2 million Khmer reside in north-eastern Thailand.¹ An additional one million Khmer live in the Mekong River Delta areas of neighbouring southern Vietnam,² while a small number (4,000) Khmer live in the southern tip of Laos.³ In the late 1970s and early 1980s a flood of Khmer refugees travelled to Western nations to avoid the diabolical killing fields of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge, when as many as two million people were butchered.⁴ Today more than 210,000 Khmer make their homes in the United States, 80,000 in France, 25,000 in Australia and thousands more in Canada, the United Kingdom and many other nations.

The Khmer civilization once ruled much of Southeast Asia. Between the 9th and 13th centuries their kingdom encompassed present-day Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and southern Vietnam. In the 1200s, the Thais and Vietnamese defeated the Khmer and pushed them into Cambodia, where most of them remain to this day. The most significant evidence of the Khmer's great past that survives is the world-famous Angkor Wat complex in Cambodia.

Theravada Buddhism was introduced to the area in the 13th century. The Khmer believe that they will be reincarnated, depending on how they lived their lives. A good person with many merits may come back in a higher social position, but one who was evil may come back as an

animal. When they bury their dead, the Khmer place the body in a coffin. Three years after the death, if the Buddhist monks have given their approval through divination, the formal funeral ceremony is held. The body is dug up and cremated, and the ashes placed inside the local pagoda. The children and grandchildren of the deceased are required to then retire to the local monastery or temple to meditate on the good qualities of the deceased person.

The Khmer's Buddhist beliefs are mixed with elements from Hinduism—especially veneration of Siva, the king of Hindu gods. Many elements of animism and spirit worship also remain from the pre-Buddhist era. They worship the *neak*, which is a heavenly dragon the Khmer claim as their progenitor. Carvings of this dragon can be found on the roofs of their homes and temples, and on things such as coffins and the handles of tools.

Because of their strong religious beliefs, throughout history relatively few Khmer have turned to God. In recent years, however, there have been encouraging signs as tens of thousands of Khmer in all areas of Cambodia have decided to follow Christ. The gospel is presently enjoying unprecedented success. Many Khmer refugees found Christ in camps inside Thailand in the 1980s and 1990s. When they finally returned to their homeland, these Christians went as evangelists with a heart of fire for God and a passion for the souls of their countrymen.⁵ Today approximately 100,000 Khmer people worldwide are Christians, although this still amounts to less than one per cent of the overall population.



Paul Hattaway



Population:

11,871,600 (2000)
14,283,400 (2010)
17,212,900 (2020)

Countries: Cambodia, Thailand, Vietnam, USA, France, Australia, Laos, Canada, United Kingdom and many other nations

Buddhism: Theravada
Christians: 100,000

Overview of the Khmer

Other Names: Central Khmer, Kmer, Khmer Krom, Cur, Cambodians, Ku, Mien, Kho Me, Cu Tho, Kampuchean

Population Sources:
9,302,700 in Cambodia (2001, P Johnstone and J Mandryk)⁶
1,200,000 in Thailand (2001, P Johnstone and J Mandryk)⁷

895,299 in Vietnam (1989 census)⁸
210,000 in USA (2001, P Johnstone and J Mandryk)
80,000 in France (2001, P Johnstone and J Mandryk)
25,000 in Australia (2001, P Johnstone and J Mandryk)
3,902 in Laos (1995 census) also in Canada, United Kingdom, and many other nations

Language: Austro-Asiatic, Mon-Khmer, Eastern Mon-Khmer, Khmer

Dialects: 3 (Central Khmer, Southern Khmer, Northern Khmer)⁹

Professing Buddhists: 96%

Practising Buddhists: 70%

Christians: 0.8%

Scripture: Bible 1954; New Testament 1929; Portions 1899

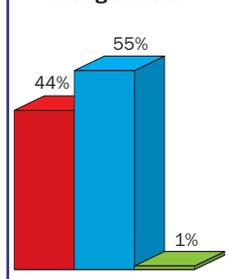
Jesus film: available

Gospel Recordings: Khmer

Christian Broadcasting: available

ROPAL code: KMR (Central Khmer) and KXM (Northern Khmer)

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