

The 3,200 Nyahkur people comprise one of Thailand's least known tribes. They inhabit valleys surrounded by lush hills in the three central Thailand provinces of Chaiyaphum, Nakhon Ratchasima and Phetchabun. The majority of Nyahkur are in Chaiyaphum. Most live in mixed villages with Isan and Thai people.

The self-name of this tribe is *Nyahkur*,

which means 'people of the forest'. The Thais call them *Chaobon*, meaning 'people of the hills'. The Nyahkur consider this latter term derogatory.

Despite their small numbers, the Nyahkur are considered a historically important group. Many linguists believe that their language is a link between

Mon and Khmer. One scholar says, 'Their language contains so many Khmer and Mon words that some linguists consider the language as a bridge . . . even more closely related to ancient Mon than to the modern Mon dialect.'<sup>1</sup>

The Nyahkur people have been described as 'addicted to borrowing'.<sup>2</sup> This has caused them to be trapped in poverty and a never-ending cycle of financial woe. As early as 1919, an anthropologist called the Nyahkur a 'disappearing society' due to rampant disease, alcohol addiction and other destructive vices.<sup>3</sup>

When the Nyahkur get married, a bride price must be paid. These days the average price is 30,000 *baht* (about US\$700). The value of a bride is measured 'by her ability as a worker, upon her beauty, especially her fair skin, and finally on the wealth of her parents'.<sup>4</sup> The record price paid for a pretty

Nyahkur girl is 60,000 *baht*.

In the past the Nyahkur were animists enslaved to powerful demons. In recent decades, due to the influence of their Thai and Isan neighbours, they have embraced Buddhism. Practically all Nyahkur now claim to be Buddhists. In reality, however, they have retained most of their former animistic practices and placed a veneer of Buddhism

over them. The Nyahkur 'still believe in many superstitions that affect every area of their lives. [They believe in] various spirits that inhabit the surroundings: village guardian spirits, mountain spirits, and soil spirits. . . . The spirits are called *nthock*. Evil spirits are blamed for almost everything

that goes wrong. The Nyahkur wear charms and amulets, such as Buddhist images, necklaces of beads and old silver coins which are believed to protect against injuries, illness, and other sorts of evils. It is said that only the wearing of a necklace made of flat pieces of copper . . . has the power to protect against *nthock lakthep*, the most powerful of all the evil spirits.'<sup>5</sup>

Despite more than 20 years of missionary effort, there are no known Nyahkur Christians today. A team of missionaries first moved into the village of Ban Wang Ai Pho in 1982, and they have worked there since. One source says, 'They were not successful in baptizing the Chaobon [Nyahkur] people, because of the superstitious and animistic nature of their beliefs. But they were very successful in studying and preserving Chaobon culture and they gave a helping hand in social, health, administrative and human matters.'<sup>6</sup>



Xayographix



**Population:**

3,140 (2000)  
3,430 (2010)  
3,750 (2020)

**Countries:** Thailand

**Buddhism:** Theravada

**Christians:** none known

**Overview of the Nyahkur**

**Other Names:** Nyakur, Niakuol, Niakuoll, Nhyakhur, Chaubun, Chaobun, Chaobon

**Population Sources:** 3,000 in Thailand (2000, J Schliesinger [1995 figure])

**Language:** Austro-Asiatic, Mon-Khmer, Monic

**Dialects:** 0

**Professing Buddhists:** 95%

**Practising Buddhists:** 75%

**Christians:** 0%

**Scripture:** none

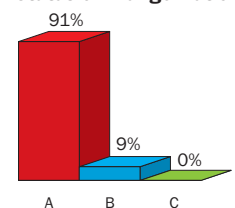
**Jesus film:** none

**Gospel Recordings:** none

**Christian Broadcasting:** none

**ROPAL code:** CBN

**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