Approximately 1.1 million Khmer people live in southern Vietnam. The great majority of Khmer (about six million) live in their homeland, Cambodia. Others are found in Thailand, Laos, and in western nations throughout the world.

The Khmer civilization once ruled much of Southeast Asia. Between the 9th and 13th centuries their kingdom encompassed much of present-day Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and southern Vietnam. In the 12th century the Thai and Vietnamese gained control over the Khmer and pushed them into Cambodia, where most of them remain today. The main symbol testifying to the greatness of the Khmer’s past is the world-famous Angkor Wat in Cambodia.

Today the Khmer in Vietnam are among the nation’s poorest people. They try to eke out a living from fishing along the river systems of the Mekong Delta.

In early 1998 the lives of many impoverished Khmer was made intolerable when the devastating Typhoon Linda struck the area. It was considered the worst storm in living memory. Just in southern Vietnam alone more than 2,000 people were killed, 2,522 boats were sunk, and 64,916 houses collapsed. In many cases Khmer women have been left with no husband, no source of income, and no way to feed their hungry children.

Although to an outsider the Khmer appear to be almost indistinguishable from the majority Vietnamese, they do in fact retain their own set of customs, language and religious beliefs. The Khmer are still looked down on by many Vietnamese, even though they have been in Vietnam for many centuries.

The Khmer script is taught by Buddhist monks to the rest of the Khmer people. In return the monks receive a small payment or some food.

In addition to fishing, the Khmer who live in areas with better soil grow vegetables, sweet potatoes, maize, sugar cane, tobacco, water melons and mangoes. The Mekong Delta area is very hot and humid most of the year.

In coastal regions some Khmer families have purchased boats and nets for ocean fishing. On the rivers, fishing is mostly carried out using nets, poles and harpoons, and even a locally-designed basket called to nong, which is thrown into the water in a bid to trap fish and eels.

Religion plays a dominant role in the everyday lives of the Khmer. Theravada Buddhism was introduced to the area in the 13th century. It is also known as Hinayana (lesser vehicle) Buddhism, as opposed to Mahayana (greater vehicle) Buddhism found in China, Japan, Tibet, etc. The Khmer believe they will be reincarnated depending on how they have lived their lives. If they were a good person with many merits they may come back in a higher social position, but if they were evil they 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 funeral 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 then required to retire to the local monastery or temple to meditate on the good qualities of the dead person.

In the Mekong River Delta alone there are more than 400 Buddhist pagodas, which is more than one pagoda for every 1,600 people on average. The Khmer’s Buddhist beliefs are mixed with elements from Hinduism, especially veneration of Siva, the king of Hindu gods. There are also many elements of animism and spirit worship remaining from the pre-Buddhist era. Worship here, a heavenly dragon is a Khmer belief their ancestor. Carvings of this dragon can be found on the roofs of their homes and temples, and on coffins and the handles of tools.

The Khmer worship the spirit of the rice and the spirits of animals.

Because of their strong religious beliefs, relatively few Khmer have turned to Christ in southern Vietnam, even though there are many Christians (primarily Catholics) in the area. Most Khmer remain completely unaware of the existence of Jesus Christ. Their belief in reincarnation deadens their conscience in regards to death and eternal matters. The Khmer Bible is not readily available in Vietnam.

**Overview of the Khmer**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Christianity</th>
<th>Language</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>Vietnamese, Thai, English</td>
<td>Khmer, Vietnamese, Thai, English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laos</td>
<td>Khmer, Chinese</td>
<td>Khmer, Chinese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>Khmer, Chinese, English</td>
<td>Khmer, Chinese, English</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Pray for the Khmer**

1. Pray the recent encouraging signs of Christian growth among the Khmer in Cambodia will extend across the border to Khmer communities outside Vietnam.
2. Ask the Lord to help three missions agencies who are doing community development work among the impoverished Khmer who have been devastated by Typhoon Linda.
3. Intercede against the powers of darkness that ensnare the Khmer that thousands may soon receive the gift of eternal life.