

According to one researcher, 10,000 Nyenpa people live in central Bhutan. They inhabit the western half of the Trongsa District, as well as areas of south-east Wangdue Phodrang District. Linguist George van Driem has given a detailed description of where the Nyenpa language, called Nyenkha, is spoken: 'Nyenkha is spoken primarily on the eastern slopes of the Black Mountains overlooking the Mangdechu River. . . . On the west bank of the Mangdechu,

the language is spoken as far north as the village of Simphu and as far south as the village of Kala across the river from Zhamgang. Nyenkha is also spoken in several villages to the east of the Mangdechu between Trongsa and Zhamgang, including Taktse, Usa and Trashidingkha. Nyenkha is also spoken on the western slopes of the Black Mountains in the villages of Phobjikha, Rid'ang and D'angchu and in surrounding hamlets of Wangdue Phodrang District.<sup>1</sup>

The ethnic name of this group, Nyenpa, or 'people of Nyen', is probably derived from the term *Ngenlung*, or 'ancient region'. This is the name the Tibetan sage Kunkhen Longchen Ramjam used to refer to west-central Bhutan in the 14th century. The name of their language, *Nyenkha*, literally means 'ancient language'.

Tibetan Buddhism has had a spiritual stronghold on the area for more than 1,000 years. Bhutan is officially a Buddhist monarchy. The state supports about 5,000 monks in various institutions known as the *sangha*. The current chief abbot of Bhutan and the head of the monastic establishment is known as the Je Khenpo.

He is the 70th elected chief abbot since the office was created in 1637. The Je Khenpo is considered the spiritual leader of Bhutan and is the only person other than the king who is allowed to wear the saffron scarf which symbolizes supreme religious authority.

In the West, Buddhism has been portrayed as a religion of peace and tolerance, but Christians in Bhutan have had very different experiences. Many have been imprisoned,

beaten, fined and persecuted for their faith in Christ. In October and November 2002, reports came out of Bhutan of mass persecution of Christians. On 24 September 2002, 40 Christians in Bhutan were arrested and tortured for their faith. When church leaders challenged the government about this action, they were told, 'We will persecute the Christians and

put an end to them in Bhutan.'<sup>2</sup>

Another report stated, 'The Bhutanese government has begun a religious-cleansing operation and in the process, they identified 500 Christian families and deported them. The methodology of identification of the Christians was novel. The government authorities went to the 300 public schools and offered chocolates to the unsuspecting and innocent school children. They asked the Christian students to raise their hands. The innocent juveniles raised their hands. Then the authorities obtained the names and addresses of the children. With the addresses collected, the authorities raided the Christian homes and forced them to flee the country. The terrified Bhutanese Christians ran for their lives and took refuge in India and Nepal.'<sup>3</sup>



Dwayne Graybill



**Population:**  
12,550 (2000)  
16,100 (2010)  
20,600 (2020)  
**Countries:** Bhutan  
**Buddhism:** Tibetan  
**Christians:** none known

## Overview of the Nyenpa

**Other Names:** Nyenkha, Ngenkha, Henkha, Lap, Mangsdekha, Mangdekha, Chutobikha, Mangdebikha

**Population Sources:**  
10,000 in Bhutan (2001, G van Driem [1991 figure])

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

**Dialects:** 2 (Phobjikha, Chutobikha)

**Professing Buddhists:** 100%

**Practising Buddhists:** 70%

**Christians:** 0%

**Scripture:** none

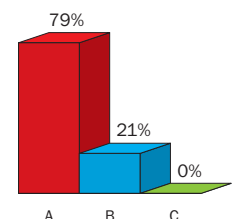
**Jesus film:** none

**Gospel Recordings:** none

**Christian Broadcasting:** none

**ROPAL code:** NEH

## 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