

Helambu Sherpa



Population:

14,700 (2000)
18,200 (2010)
22,500 (2020)

Countries: Nepal

Buddhism: Tibetan

Christians: 40

Overview of the Helambu Sherpa

Other Names: Helambu, Yohimu Tam, Sharpa, Sharpa Bhotia, Xiaerba, Serwa, Xiarba

Population Sources:

14,700 in Nepal (1997, Bethany World Prayer Center [2000 figure])

5,000 to 10,000 in Nepal (2000, B Grimes [1998 figure])

Language: Sino-Tibetan, Tibeto-Burman, Himalayish, Tibeto-Kanauri, Tibetic, Tibetan, Central

Dialects: 2 (Eastern Helambu Sherpa, Western Helambu Sherpa)

Professing Buddhists: 99%

Practising Buddhists: 75%

Christians: 0.3%

Scripture: none

Jesus film: none

Gospel Recordings: Sherpa: Helambu

Christian Broadcasting: none

ROPAL code: SCP

Approximately 15,000 Helambu Sherpa people live in the Nuwakot and Sindhupalchok districts of the Bagmati Zone in central Nepal. A sizeable community of Helambu Sherpa also lives in the nation's capital, Kathmandu. Most Helambu Sherpa are farmers. Their main crops are potatoes and corn. They often take their produce to the market towns and use it to buy goods or barter for rice.

Despite their names, the Helambu Sherpa are not the same as the main Sherpa group in Nepal, Bhutan, China and India. The term *Sherpa* simply means 'easterners'. Helambu Sherpa is a Central Tibetan language, while Sherpa is a completely unrelated Southern Tibetan language. The two groups refuse to intermarry and have little to do with each other.

The Helambu Sherpa 'are believed to have migrated from Tibet to Nepal around the 15th century. The Helambu Sherpa are often confused with the Solokumbu Sherpa because both groups are referred to only as "Sherpa". However, each group is totally distinct from the other, with different cultures and languages.¹

The Nepali government has combined the two Sherpa groups together in their official census figure, along with some other ethnic groups such as Khampa and some Tamang. This artificial combination produced an inflated figure of 110,358 Sherpa in the 1991 Nepal census.

Practically all Helambu Sherpa people, except for a few recent converts to Christianity, practise Tibetan Buddhism. One source states, 'The Helambu Sherpa

migrated from Tibet to Nepal in the 15th century in order to flee religious persecution. At that time, a Mongol king attempted to force them to convert to his sect of Buddhism. The people fled to the Khumbu region, and later moved further into the Helambu region.² In the rural villages, the Helambu Sherpa 'observe all the Tibetan

festivals and follow the religion of Tibetan Buddhism, but also put much faith in shamans (witch doctors). One of their festivals, called Gyawa, occurs 49 days after a person dies. They gather together and everyone eats as much as they can because they believe that all food eaten at the festival will go directly to the dead person for him or her to eat.³

The gospel has made little impact on the Helambu Sherpa villages, but many of those living in the towns and in Kathmandu have heard the good news and a small number have decided to follow Christ. The new believers have encountered opposition from their fellow tribesmen, who view their belief in Christianity as a betrayal of their ancestors and culture. Gospel recordings are available in the Helambu Sherpa language. One mission agency in the late 1990s wrote, 'Many Helambu Sherpas are aware of Christianity and even know what the cross symbolizes. About half of them have heard the name of Jesus or received Christian literature and about 10% have even visited a church. They are highly protective however, of their religious and cultural identity and are likely to persecute new believers, or those interested in the gospel.'⁴



Nancy Sturrock

