

Who are the Western Cham?

About 500,000 Western Cham people live in Cambodia. Most Cham villages are located in the Kampong Cham province just north of Phnom Penh. Cham people can also be found in Vietnam, Malaysia and Thailand.

Cambodia's Western Cham trace their ancestry to the ancient Champa kingdom, a wealthy maritime kingdom in frequent contact with China. Originally centered in Vietnam, the Champa kingdom gradually lost territory between the 15th and 18th centuries, leading many Cham to seek a new homeland in Cambodia.



The Western Cham, who make up the majority of Cambodia's tiny Muslim population, suffered heavily under the

Khmer Rouge regime in the 1970s. Entire villages were slaughtered. Today, the Cham are a small, disenfranchised minority in the majority-Buddhist nation of Cambodia.

Languages

The Cham language is related to Malay. Some Cham also speak Khmer, the official language of Cambodia. Students may learn Thai, Arabic or Malay in order to pursue studies abroad.

Livelihood



Most of the Cham people live in desolate villages along the banks of the Mekong and Tonle Sap Rivers.

Many Cham are fishermen, some living on houseboats. Others are farmers, cultivating wet and dry rice as well as cotton, maize, tobacco, castor-oil plants, manioc, peanuts, ferns, beans and other vegetables. The Cham also hunt and raise domestic animals. Some Cham are cattle traders and butchers. Like other Cambodians, many Cham are very poor.

Beliefs

Religious practices among the Cham have varied widely over the centuries. Ancient

Cham people worshipped a "Mother Goddess," a common practice in agrarian societies.

Indian traders in the 3rd and 4th centuries introduced Hinduism, and the Cham began worshipping the Hindu gods Shiva, Brahma and Vishnu. Mahayana Buddhism also became influential. Despite these influences, however, the common people of Champa often preferred traditional spiritual practices such as ancestor and hero worship and fertility cults.

The Western Cham of Cambodia gradually accepted Islam over a period of several centuries. Today almost all Western Cham are Muslim. Despite their commitment to Islam, however, animistic practices continue to be observed in many rural areas.

The early Cham Muslims developed a unique form of Islam that is different from Middle Eastern patterns. Some Cham continue to practice this traditional Cham Islam today. However, Islam in Cambodia has seen a revival in recent years, and many Cham have begun practicing a "purer," more global form of Islam.

Islamic movements such as Chang Veng, Imam San, *Da'wah* and *Wahhabiyya* are active in Cambodia. Chang Veng villages receive support from Muslims in Malaysia, and tend to mix Malay words with their vocabulary. Imam San villages have fewer connections with the outside world because their approach to animistic traditions is unacceptable to fundamentalist Islam. *Da'wah* is a conservative missionary movement originating in Islamic countries outside Cambodia. Visiting groups of *Da'wah* missionaries can be seen in Cambodia today. Missionaries travel from village to village spreading their beliefs, preaching and living in village mosques during their stay. The *Wahhabiyya* movement, like *Da'wah*, also preaches a fundamentalist type of Islam.

Dozens of Cham have decided to follow Jesus. While the Bible has not yet been translated into the Cham language, there is some media available. There are no known fellowships of followers of Jesus.

For more information about the Western Cham, visit: www.apeopleloved.com/cambodia



Population: 500,000
Location: Cambodia
Languages: Cham, Khmer

Prayer Points

Praise God for the Cham who have decided to follow Jesus. Pray that they would begin to meet together in house fellowships for worship, study and prayer. May they reach out to their families and communities, demonstrating God's love and sharing the Good News.

Pray that God would send more followers of Jesus to serve the Cham. Pray that followers of Jesus would find ways to reach out in love to struggling Cham communities and that they would share the Good News in culturally sensitive ways.

Pray for the nation of Cambodia as it continues to develop. Pray for the leaders of Cambodia to make wise decisions to help the nation develop a strong, stable economy. Pray for improved living standards throughout the nation.

Pray for linguists and skilled Cham translators to make the stories of Jesus available in the Cham language.