

The Nuristanis of Afghanistan

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Until the beginning of the 20th century, Afghanistan was mainly an affiliation of tribes, held together by intrigue and force of the rulers. Today Afghanistan is an independent nation. It is home to more than 70 different ethnic groups, and the Nuristanis represent less than 1% of the total population. The region called Nuristan is located in northeastern Afghanistan at the southern end of the Hindu Kush Mountains. Nuristan has a temperate climate with enough rainfall to adequately irrigate the crops. The Nuristani languages are divided in six sub-groups called: Ashkun, Kamviri, Kati, Prasuni, Tregami and Waigali. They belong to the Indo-European language family.

Afghanistan's economy is based on farming and raising livestock. While there is little fertile land in the mountains, there are good grazing grounds. As a result, the Nuristanis practice a somewhat nomadic lifestyle, moving their herds according to the seasons. Most Nuristani groups have two classes: the lower class artisans and the upper class landowners. The main crafts of the artisans are woodworking, weaving, black smithing, pottery, and basketry. Their products are used by all the village people. Bazaars are important trade centers for both agricultural products and craft items. The basic unit of the Nuristani community is the village, which is surrounded by farm land and grazing land. The land is owned by the male head of the family, and grazing rights are inherited by his sons. Cooperation is based on kinship ties and relatives are expected to support one another in times of crisis or need. In addition to class distinction, the Nuristani practice a division of labor according to sex. Traditionally, both males and females were expected to contribute to making meals. The women provided the bread, which symbolized their responsibility of farming, and gathering firewood. The men supplied a dairy product, representing their responsibility of herding the animals.

Primary Religion:

Islam

Disciples (Matt 28.19):

< 1%

Churches:

0

Scripture Status (Matt 28.20):

None in their language

Population (date):

195,000 (1993)



Map Unavailable

The Nuristanis of Afghanistan

Item Name	Item Note	
Have They Heard The Gospel?		Profile Summary
Call Themselves Christian (%)	0%	
Believe In Jesus As God & Only Savior (%)	< 1%	
Prophet/Good Man, But Not God's Son (%)	95%	
Believe In The Local Traditional Religion (%)	5%	
Have Not Heard Who Jesus is (%)	100%	
Number Of Churches	0	
Is The Word Of God Translated?	No	
Any Hinderance To Scripture Distribution?	There is no Scripture in the Nuristani languages. Those men bilingual in a language of wider communication could use either Pashto or Dari Scriptures.	
	Literacy Rate: mother-tongue not written. Among the men some bilingualism exists with Pashto of around 10% as an overall estimate. Eastern Farsi (Dari) is also used. No bilingualism among the women.	
Forms Of Gospel Presentation Available (Summary)	There is no written form of the Nuristani languages. There are audio recordings of some stories of the Bible.	
Countries Where People Group Lives		Group Description
Country Name	Afghanistan	
Geography & Environment		Group Description
Location	Five major valleys to the west of Kunar river at the southern end of the Hindu Kush mountain range in the northeastern part of Afghanistan.	
Country	Afghanistan	
Ecosystem Type	Scrub Forest	
Ecosystem Type	Savannas	
Geological Type	Mountain, Valley	
Elevation	8,000-14,000 ft	
Climate	Temperate climate. There is a snowy season.	
Language & Linguistics		Group Description
Comment (Language)	The language name is Nuristani. The Ethnologue Code is ISO 639-2 (inc with 6 sub-groups).	
Comment (Language)	The monolingualism percentages are estimates.	
Attitude Towards Mother Tongue	Very receptive	
Percent Monolingual (%)	50% (men)	
Percent Monolingual (%)	100% (women)	
Second Languages	DARI	
Second Languages	PASHTO, SOUTHERN	
Second Languages	PASHTO, NORTHERN	
Second Languages	PASHTO, CENTRAL	
Second Languages	WANECI	
Comments (Related Languages)	DARDIC languages and, more broadly, INDO-ARYAN languages are linguistically related to the NURISTANI languages.	
Neighboring Languages	PASHTO, SOUTHERN	
Neighboring Languages	KHOWAR	
Neighboring Languages	KALASHA	
Neighboring Languages	GABRI	
Neighboring Languages	PASHTO, CENTRAL	
Neighboring Languages	YIDGHA	

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Item Name

Item Note

Neighboring Languages

MUNJI

Neighboring Languages

GAWAR-BATI

Neighboring Languages

PASHAYI, SOUTHEAST

Neighboring Languages

SANGLECHI-ISHKASHIMI

Comments (Neighbor Languages)

NORTHERN PASHTO is also a neighboring language of the Nuristani languages.

Corrections To Ethnologue Entry

Ashkun, Kamviri, Kati, Prasuni, Tregami, and Waigali are not names of distinct languages, but alternate names for Nuristani.

Literacy

Group Description

Adult Literacy Percentage

<1% (Nuristani languages)

Percent Literate For Men

15-25%

Percent Literate For Women

0%

Active Literacy Program

No

Publications In Vernacular

None

Economics

Group Description

Subsistence Type

Pastoralists

Occupation

women: farming, men: gathering

Income Sources

goatskin, nuts, agricultural products, craft items, wood, precious stones

Products / Crafts

woodworking, weaving, black smithing, pottery and basketry, handicrafts; Traditional handicrafts are widespread, highly developed, and often very refined.

Trade Partners

Pashai, Pashtoons, Chitralis, Tajiks, Badakhshani

Modernization / Utilities

1 battery-powered radio per village, no electricity

Community Development

Group Description

Health Care (Quality)

Poor

Comment (Diet)

corn bread, bread, dairy products, mulberries, nuts

Water (Quality)

Good

Comment (Water)

rivers and irrigation channels built to the villages

Shelter Description

homes made out of stone and wood in the eastern valleys and of mud in the western valleys. Usually two story buildings. The lower floor is for animals and storage and the upper floor for the family. The houses are usually built onto the hills because farmable land is very precious.

Electricity

None

Clothing

fabric, wool

Transportation

on foot, donkeys, mules, horses

Life Expectancy

approx. 45

Comment (Community Development)

Wood is used for fuel.

Society & Culture

Group Description

Neighbor Relations

They are friendly with the Pashai, but dislike the Pashtoons.

Authority / Rule

leading men of the extended family

Identification With National Culture

Distinct

Religion & Response

Status of Christianity

The Nuristanis of Afghanistan

Item Name

Comment (Religion)

Item Note

What are their beliefs?

All the Nuristani groups once shared a common religion. They believed that the world was divided into pure and impure, corresponding to the division between gods and people. The gods were said to determine the destiny of people, which was based on the generosity of sacrifices to the gods and the purity of individuals and their families.

Shamans acted as intermediaries for the people. Purification rites and sacrifices were performed by others. Around 120 years ago in 1895-96 the Nuristanis were forcefully converted to Islam by the Afghan armies of Amir Abdur Rahman Khan of Kabul

What are their needs?

There are very few known disciples among the Nuristanis.

Because of the remoteness of their area they are one of the most neglected ethnic groups of the country. In many valleys there are still no roads, no electricity, no schools and no health facilities.

History Of Christianity In Group

Status of Christianity

Significant Events

Some Nuristani groups had explicitly asked for Christian teaching 30 years before the Amir of Kabul came and converted them to Islam, but no one provided the teaching.

Scripture

Status of Christianity

Translation Status

Possible

Available Scripture

None

Other Forms Of Gospel Available: Recordings

Yes. Some gospel recordings done by J. Christy Wilson.