Why Study Baoule?

Baoule is the language of the Akan people who inhabit Ghana and Côte d’Ivoire. Three hundred years ago they migrated westward from Ghana when the Asante rose to power. Their oral and historical traditions are passed down through the language of Baoule, including the tale of how they broke away from the Asante.

Studying Baoule language in the U.S will help communication, culturally and economically, with the over 2 million people who speak Baoule. In this part of the world, education is very competitive and schooling is a privilege, and not a right like in the American Education system. Only the families that can afford sending their children to private school will receive a formal education, including the learning of foreign languages. Therefore, much of the less fortunate feel much more comfortable speaking in their mother tongue - Baoule, than an ill-taught second language. Studying the language will allow the story and culture of the indigenous people of Ivory Coast to become available.

The study of the Baoule language also helps understand their religion and culture. The Baoule speakers believe in a god called Aloulou as their creator and in Asie as a god who controls human and animals. Baule religion includes ancestor worship and a hierarchy of nature gods. These nature spirits, or amuen, are represented in sculpture and masked figures. However, their creator god, Aloulou, is not represented but remains omnipresent. The foundation of Baule social and political institutions is the matrilineal lineage; each lineage has ceremonial stools that embody ancestral spirits. Paternal descent is recognized, however, and certain spiritual and personal qualities are believed to be inherited through it.

What’s the nature of their language and culture?

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Baoule children are involved in everyday chores from very young age, such as carrying water from the village pumps or heavy loads of food and firewood to the village market. The boy assists his father with clearing vegetation. Baoule children as with other Akan groups are often named according to the day of the week or the circumstance under which they were born.

The staple food of the Baoule and other Ivorians is the yam. The importance of the yam is demonstrated in an annual harvest festival in which the first yam is symbolically offered to the ancestors. Yams, in addition to corn are stored until they are needed. Foods such as fish are obtained from the local market. Meat is obtained from goats, sheep and chickens. Milk is obtained from their goats and their eggs from their chickens.
WHO ARE THE BAOULE PEOPLE?

The Baoule or Baule are part of the Akan ethnic cluster that live in Côte d’Ivoire and Ghana. There are about half a million Baoules in Côte d’Ivoire, which makes them one of the largest ethnic groups in that area. According to oral tradition, the Baoules are said to have migrated westwards from Ghana when the Asante people rose to power. During that time, the Baoule were ruled by a queen called Aura Poku who was in competition with the Asante king. When the Asante prevailed over the Baoule, the queen led the Baoule people west to the shores of the Comoë, over the Bandama River. In order to cross the river she sacrificed her own son. This sacrifice was the origin of the name Baule, for baouli means “the child has died.” Baule society is characterized by extreme individualism, great tolerance, a deep aversion toward rigid political structures, and a lack of age classes, initiation, circumcision, priests, secret societies, or associations with hierarchical levels. Each village is independent from the others and makes its own decisions under the presiding presence of a council of elders. Everyone participates in discussions, including slaves. It is an egalitarian society. The Baoule compact villages are divided into wards, or quarters, and subdivided into family compounds of rectangular dwellings arranged around a courtyard; the compounds are usually aligned on either side of the main village street. In addition the Baule people are very resilient. They have played a central role in twentieth-century history of the country. They waged the longest war of resistance against French colonization of any West African people, and maintained their traditional objects and beliefs longer than many groups in such constant contact with European administrators, traders, and missionaries.

WHAT’S THE NATURE OF THEIR LANGUAGE AND CULTURE?

The Baoule are notable for their art and craft work which reflects a strong Asante influence. Apart from creating sculptures made of wood, gold and brass they also engage in carving masked figures that have been greatly influenced by their neighbors: the Senufo, Malinke and Guro. Masks correspond to several types of dances: thegba gba, thebonu amuen, themblo and thegoli. They never represent the ancestors and are always worn by men. Thegba gba is used at the funerals of women during the harvest season. It celebrates beauty and age. Thebonu amuen protects the village from external threats; it obliges the woman to a certain discipline; and it appears at the commemorations of death of notables. Mblo is the name of a performance category that uses face masks in skits and solo dances. Mblo masks, used in entertainment dances are one of the oldest of Baule art forms. These refined human face masks are usually portraits of particular known individuals. Goli is the day-long spectacle that normally involves the whole village and includes the appearance of four pairs of masks, music played on special instruments, and, ideally, the joyous consumption of a great deal of palm wine. Goli can be performed both as an entertainment and for the funeral of important men.

In addition sculptures are used to honor the families’ spiritual spouse. Baule figures answer to two types of devotion: one depicts the “spiritual” spouse who, in order to be appeased, requires the creation of a shrine in the personal hut of the individual. A man will own his spouse, theblolo bian, and a woman her spouse, theblolo bla. The Baule believe that before they were born into the world they existed in a spirit world, where each one had a mate. Sometimes that spirit mate becomes jealous of their earthly mate and causes marital discord. When this happens, a figure depicting the other world spouse is carved and placated with earthly signs of attention.

One of the favorite pastimes of the Baoule is the gameAtte, which is similar to the North American game of marbles, however they utilize nuts not marbles.