WHY STUDY MANDINKA?

It is worth noting that a significant number of African Americans in the United States are descendants of the Mandinka people. One of the most notable Mandinka figures is Kunta Kinte whose name was popularized in Alex Haley’s book, Roots, and the subsequent television series. Haley claimed that his descent was from Kunta Kinte. Mr T, the famous American television personality also claims that his distinctive hairstyle has been modeled after that of Mandinka warriors. Admittedly, many celebrities and other popular figures in West Africa and beyond have close links with Mandinka ancestry. These include Alhaji Kabbah, former President of Sierra Leone; Sekou Toure, former President of Guinea; Salif Keita, the musician from Mali; Abdul Keita, the football star from Cote d’Ivoire; Soulemane Diawara, the football star from Senegal, Sir Dawda Jawara, former President of Gambia; and Cheick Kongo, the martial artist from Burkina Faso. For African Americans in search of their African heritage, a study of Mandinka language and culture can be hard to resist. Like Alex Haley and Mr T, knowledge of Mandinka can be a powerful statement about one’s origins and identity.

WHAT’S THE NATURE OF THEIR LANGUAGE AND CULTURE?

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Rites of passage are held to mark the beginning of adulthood for Mandinka children. Both male and female children between the ages of four and fourteen have their genitalia ritually cut in separate age sets. The practice is done in secluded bushes and lasts between three to four weeks. During this time the children learn about family responsibilities, behaviour expectations, cultural identity, gender role relationships and social solidarity. Most of the teaching happens through song, dance and drumming. The Mandinka worldview is populated with malevolent spirits and witchcraft beliefs. These spirits can only be controlled through the power of marabouts that are believed to know the protective formulas. For this reason, no important decision can be made without first consulting the marabouts who have been trained in the Qu’ran (or Koran). Although a few Mandinkas have converted to Christianity, the majority of them are opposed to teachings of the Bible. Hence Christian converts are viewed as traitors to Mandinka society, its heritage and ancestral beliefs.

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WHO ARE THE MANDINKA PEOPLE?

The Mandinka, also known as the Mandaling or Malinke, are one of the largest and popular ethnic group in West Africa. They have an estimated population of over 11 million that spreads across the whole West African region. While the Mandinka people can be found in Guinea Bissau, Mali, Sierra Leone, Cote d’Ivoire, Senegal, Burkina Faso, Liberia, Niger, Mauritania and Chad, the majority of them live in Gambia. They are descendents of the Mali Empire that rose to power under the rule of the great king Sundiata Keita. They make up one of the largest ethno-linguistic groups called the Mande who number more than 20 million people including the Dyula, Bozo and Bambara.

The Mandinka migrated westwards from the Niger river basin in search of better agricultural lands and opportunities for conquest. During this historical expansion, they established their empire in the area stretching from present day Gambia to Guinea. While the majority of Mandinkas were still animists up to the 18th century, over 99% converted to Islam through a series of conflicts with the Fula led kingdom of Fouta Djallon and the Mande led empire of Kaabu. This conversion began during the reign of the Mandinka ruler, Mansa Musa (AD 1320 – 1358). From the 16th to the 18th century, more than a third of the Mandinkas were shipped to the Americas as slaves through capture in conflicts.

A considerable number of the Mandinka people have been located along long distance trade routes beginning from the time of the Mali Empire. Many are referred to as dyula, a Mande word meaning ‘merchant’. Mandinka communities established their trading networks near mining and agricultural centres which later became the lynchpin for trade with European merchants from the 17th century. Much of the overland trade connecting the coast with the interior was controlled by the Mandinka merchants. The other part of Mandinka people are rural subsistence farmers. While the women work in the rice fields, the men engage in peanut production as the main cash crop.

WHAT’S THE NATURE OF THEIR LANGUAGE AND CULTURE?

Mandinka belongs to the Mande cluster of languages that makes up the largest ethno-linguistic group in West Africa. They possess a very rich cultural heritage that has been passed on from generation to generation. The typical Mandinka family lives in village compounds headed by a chief and a group of elders. Most of their education is done through stories, songs and proverbs conveyed by praise singers or griots. Perhaps the most distinctive trait of the Mandinka is their popular music which is played on a unique musical instrument called the kora. The kora has emerged as the hallmark of traditional Mandinka musicians. Its is a 21 string harp-like instrument made of a large calabash or gourd covered with cow skin. There is a belief that as the kora is played, it takes on a life of its own to a point where the singer and the instrument become one. Traditionally, the kora was regarded as the storage for historical facts, the memory of people’s genealogy, the singer of their praises, the intermediary of family disputes, the guardian of culture and the source of entertainment. However, the kora is gradually losing its importance as it has primarily become a symbol of cultural tourism.

Historically, Mandinka marriages were arranged by family members rather than the bride and groom. The suitor’s family would formally send kola nuts to the male elders of the prospective bride. The acceptance of the kola nut marked the beginning of courtship. Mandinka men are allowed to have up to four wives as long as they can take care of them. Men have total authority over their wives and are responsible for feeding and clothing them.