WHY STUDY ZARMA?

While French and English are widely used for communication, education and administration, knowledge of Zarma is however necessary for shopping, socialization and business contacts. Even the most basic understanding of Zarma goes a long way in the local markets and professional circles.

As descendants of the great Songhay kingdom, the Zarma occupy an influential position in the history, politics and culture of Nigeriens. Flugelstad (1983) contends that from the 16th century onwards many disparate groups were assimilated into Zarma language and culture. The history of West Africa cannot be complete without a study of a people who played the most pivotal role in the historic Songhay Empire.

You need to study Zarma to appreciate that it is a member of the Songhai language grouping. It is the main language spoken in Niamey, the capital city of Niger. It is the second leading language after Hausa. When you study Zarma, you will be able to notice the similarities and the differences from English. For example, the word “to be” can be expressed in so many more different ways that you can ever imagine. It is really an interesting language especially when you delve into the participles as well as the verbs.

WHAT’S THE NATURE OF THEIR LANGUAGE AND CULTURE?

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The Zarma believe that a living person consists of the body (ga), the invisible double (biya), which gives each person his or her singularity and the life force (fundi). These elements are believed to breakup at death.

The Zarma make fine basketry in particular the colorful, hand-dyed mats, covers, and hangers of storage containers, which are made by women from Doum-palm leaves. They are well known for their pottery and their woven blankets.

The staple crop of the Zarma is millet which is intercropped with cowpeas, sorrel, and Bambara and other groundnuts. Sorghum and manioc are also cultivated in areas with heavier soils. Agriculture relies on household labor and use of simple hand tools and very limited use of animal traction. The Zarma raise small ruminants and poultry that provide meat for religious ceremonies, baptisms and other special occasions.

The Zarma are generally characterized by a sense of tradition, close family ties, tolerance and consideration for others. The Zarma practice polygamy, hence their families are generally large. Many of them live in the rural areas engaging in subsistence farming. They grow rice, corn, millet and sorghum for food and cotton, tobacco, cowpeas and peanuts as cash crops. Milk is an important part of the Zarma people’s diet and culture, therefore cattle are regarded as a source of wealth.
WHO ARE THE ZARMA PEOPLE?

The Zarma people, also known as Zerma, Djerma, Dyerma or Zaberma, are found in the western part of Niger and the adjacent parts of Burkina Faso. They are an ethnic group of the Songhay people whose great kingdom flourished during the 14th and 15th centuries in the region extending from Mali to western Nigeria. They represent approximately 2 million people or 22% of Niger’s population. Because the capital city, Niamey, is located in their homeland, the Zarma constitute the majority of the city’s population. Originally, the Zarma were farmers and fishermen, but with the coming of French colonialism they were the first to benefit from the French education system. As a result, the Zarma have a strong presence in both central government (or public sector) and the private sector.

The Zarma are the second-largest ethnic group in the Niger Republic, in West Africa, and they have close cultural affinities with the Songhay. Zarma women make plain and brightly colored mats, round covers and hangers for storage containers from Doum-palm leaves and engage in petty trading within Niger, while Zarma men use the leaves to make rope and engage in long distant trading. Men have the primary responsibility for clearing, sowing, weeding, guarding against pests, and harvesting. In addition to shoveling a full range of demanding domestic tasks, women participate in the sowing and harvesting of the household fields, and they often cultivate small dry-season gardens in river-valley areas. In Zarmaganda, women work alongside their husbands in cultivating millet; in Zarmatarey, they do not.

Polygamy is highly valued among Zarma men, but monogamy is more common statistically, accounting for 70 to 80 percent of all households. The incidence of polygamy is higher among older and wealthier men; it is considered evidence of social success.

Zarma parents discipline their children only occasionally. From about 6 years of age, children are initiated through play and light work into their future gender roles as adults. Children accompany their parents to the fields at sowing time to watch, and they follow along, learn the movements, and help carry seed. Boys are assigned to watch after goats and sheep and to cut grass and branches for fodder. Girls care for younger children, often carrying them on their backs as older women do; they play by pounding millet and sell cola nuts or prepared foods in the village for their mothers. Boys are circumcised at an early age but it is not a compulsory rite. Zarma combines some elements of Islam life in prayers, fasting, sacrifices and the hajj with traditional beliefs in nature, sky, thunder, lightning, water, and the bush. They also believe in spirits, spirit cults, and spirit worship, as well as healing, magic, and sorcery. These spirits manifest themselves through trances and the possession of individuals who become spirit priests and healers. The Marabouts are the Islamic leaders who study the Quran and lead Islamic observances.

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF THEIR LANGUAGE AND CULTURE?

Zarma is one of the 10 official Songhay languages that have official recognition in Niger. These languages include Hausa, Fulfude (or Fulani), Kanouri, Tamachek, Tasawak, Toubou, Boudouma, Gourmantchema and Arabic. Niger is therefore a multilingual Francophone country with Zarma as its leading indigenous language. The majority of Zarma people are Muslims and religion plays a central role in their daily lives. However, animist practices are often mixed with Islamic worship, especially in the rural villages. Islam is manifested in public life such as in prayers, fasting, sacrifices and the hajj. Pre-Islamic beliefs that are practiced are tied to nature such as the earth and sky, thunder and lightning, water, and the bush. Spirits, spirit cults, and spirit worship, as well as healing, magic, and sorcery are manifested in pre-Islamic practices. The most important in spirit-cult ceremony is yenendi (“cooling off”), held toward the end of the long hot season (May/June) during which there is dancing and music, when the spirits are requested to provide good rains and ample harvests.