LANGUAGE & CULTURE

As it was mentioned earlier, in linguistics, when you speak about “Manding” you mean the dialects of Bambara, Diula, Malinke, etc. Manding is a member of the “Mande” language group, which, according to Greenberg’s classification (1966), belongs to the large ‘Niger-Congo’ language family.

The Manding people played important political and cultural roles in West Africa from the middle ages until the 19th century. A very famous Manding emperor was Sundjata Keita, founder of the Mali empire. During his reign, he unified all Manding ethnic groups that were divided and were suffering from slavery and internal rivalry. Later on, in the 18th and 19th centuries, the Bamana kingdoms of Segu, Kaarta (today in Mali) and the Kingdom of SamoriTure (in Guinea and in Mali) contributed in spreading the Manding/Bamana language and culture. The famous Manding traders of this period called “Diula”, carried their goods (cola-nuts) on their heads and Koran in their hand and walked almost everywhere in West Africa. That’s how they spread the Bamana language and culture.

The Bamana are a patrilineal and patrilocal society, which is divided into castes based on occupation. The two most important castes are farmers and artisans. Members of artisans families are called nyamakalaw, “handlers-of-power.” The artisan caste includes blacksmiths, leatherworkers, poets and weavers. The Bamana have a long oral tradition, the caste of the society who keeps the knowledge from generation to generation are called djeli. They can be considered as the library of the society. In addition, in the Bamana tradition, the notion of “family” is more important than the notion of “individual”. That means that every person is identified within his family circle. As the member of a community, you are expected to always honor and respect elderly people in the family and in the community.

Although most Bamana people are either Muslims or Christians today, they converted to Islam and Christianity later than some other ethnic groups in West Africa. For a long time, the Bamana people were reluctant to convert to Islam or Christianity, preferring their traditional religion, which until now, is still practiced by a small number of Bamana in remote villages.

STUDYING BAMANA IN THE U.S.

Below is a list of some universities in the United States that currently offer Bamana. For more information, please contact the National African Language Resource Center, or check the NALRC web site at http://www.nalrc.indiana.edu.

Boston University
Indiana University
Michigan State University
University of California at Los Angeles
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
University of Pennsylvania
Summer Cooperative African Language Institute (SCALI)

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TWO YOUNG BAMANA WOMEN IN TRADITIONAL BOGOLAN ATTIRE
WHY STUDY BAMANA?

Bamana, called "Bamanankan" by the native speakers is no doubt one of the most spoken languages in West Africa. It is spoken in Burkina Faso, in Guinea-Conakry, in Northern Cote-d’Ivoire, in Senegal, but especially in Mali where it is the first or second language of 80 % of the population.

There are many reasons for studying Bamana. These include personal interest in the culture of the Bamana people, research interests and fulfillment of foreign language requirements.

The knowledge of Bamana language will be very helpful to students in Linguistics, Anthropology, Sociology, History as well as to linguists who plan to conduct research in one of the countries mentioned above. International workers, Peace Corps volunteers, diplomats, and missionaries will find it essential to learn Bamana in order to communicate and collaborate with the local populations.

The artistic tradition of the Bamana people is rich, filled with pottery, sculptures, beautiful bokolanfini cloth, and wrought iron figures fashioned by blacksmiths. They also have extensive masking traditions, which are used as a form of social control and community education.

In the field of linguistics, Bamana is one of the most written languages in West Africa. European and American linguists have written it since the end of the 19th century. Today, we find interesting documentation on the Bamana language particularly in German. For students in comparative linguistics, Bamana could be an interesting language. It has borrowed many words from French, Arabic and a smaller number of words from English. As a result of long cohabitation, Bamana and some languages of the Mande group have many common words.

As regards the names "Bamana" and "Bambara", there is no difference. Both names are used for the same language.
"Bambara" is the French name for the variety of Bamana spoken in Mali. Actually, the name "Bambara" is more popular in Europe whereas "Baman" is more used in the United States.

WHO SPEAKS BAMANA?

PEOPLE AND HISTORY

Today, Bamana is spoken by more than 26 million speakers as first or second language across the western part of Africa. In Linguistics, when you speak about "Manding", you mean generally the following dialects: Bambara in Mali and in Senegal, Diula in Cote-d'Ivoire, in Burkina Faso and Malinke in Guinea-Conakry, etc.

In American universities, the name Bamana is used for these three varieties: Bambara, Diula and Malinke. The three dialects are very close. They designate not only varieties of the same language but also ethnic groups that speak them. Bambara, Diula and Malinke show a large homogeneity in vocabulary and grammar. The different speakers understand one another very well.

Majority of Bamana speakers live in Mali. There are also many Bamana speakers in Guinea-Conakry, in Cote-d'Ivoire, in Burkina Faso and in Senegal. There are smaller groups of speakers in Sierra Leone and Liberia.

The Bamana language is today one of the biggest language of communication in the countries named above. For that reason, it has become an important language in the media in particular in the radio and on the television. Official newspapers are even published in Bamana in some countries. Because of the importance of Bamana as a national language, the governments of some countries such as Mali and Guinea now try to teach elementary students in Bamana parallel to French, which is the official language.

Bamana has become an important language of communication in the western part of Africa because it is very easy to learn and easy to understand. For that reason, speakers of many other ethnic groups understand it and speak it very well. This is why, in some Bamana speaking countries, Bamana plays the role of social cohesion and understanding between different ethnic groups.

Nowadays, another reason for the spread of Bamana is due to the Manding Music. Some examples of famous Manding-Musicians are, Aicha Kone, Ami Koita, Alpha Blondy, Oumou Sangare, Salif Keita, Sori Kandja Kouyate, etc.