LANGUAGE & CULTURE

Bamileke belongs to the Mbam-Nkam group of Graffi languages, whose attachment to the Bantu division is still disputed. While some consider it as a Bantu or a semi-Bantu language, others prefer to include Bamileke in the Niger-Congo group. Bamileke is not an unique language. It seems that Bamileke Medumba stems from ancient Egyptian and is a root language for many other Bamileke variants.

The Bamiléké languages, which are tonal, belong to the Grasslands Bantu Group of the Broad Bantu languages. Nearly every Bamileke kingdom names its own dialect as a separate language. Bamiléké languages are not always mutually intelligible between bordering kingdoms.

The Bamileke are renowned for their skilled craftsmanship. Bamileke are particularly celebrated carvers in wood, ivory, and horn. Chief’s compounds are notable for their intricately carved door frames and columns. Much of the art produced by the Bamileke tribes are associated with royal ceremonies. Beadwork and masks are common in this tribe. Even the king may put on a mask for an appearance at a Kuosi celebration which is a public dance held every other year as a display of the kingdom’s wealth. Bamileke of Cameroon raise their dead to the rank of ancestors, worthy of worship and sacrifice. Special attention is reserved for ancestors-in-law and maternal grandfather and great-grandfather.

STUDYING BAMILEKE IN THE UNITED STATES

Please contact the National African Language Resource Center, or check the NALRC website at http://www.nalrc.indiana.edu/

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WHO SPEAKS AMILEKE?

The Bamileke is the ethnic group which is now dominant in Cameroon’s West and Northwest Provinces. Each tribe is under the guidance of a chief or fon (considered the spiritual, political, judicial and military leader, as well as the ‘Father’ of the chiefdom), but all of these groups have the same ancestors and thus share the same history, culture, and languages. The fondoms of the Bafang, Bafousam, Bandjoun, Bangangté, Bawaju, Dschang, and Mbouda are the most prominent.

The Bamileke’s settlements follow a well-organized and structured pattern. Houses of family members are often grouped together, often surrounded by small fields. Men typically clear the fields, but it is mostly women that work on them. Most of the work is done with tools like machetes and hoes. Staple crops include cocoyams, groundnuts, and maize.

Their traditional homes are constructed by first erecting a raffia-pole frame into four square walls. Builders then stuff the resulting holes with grass and cover the whole building with mud. The thatched roof is typically shaped into a tall cone. Nowadays, however, this type of construction is mostly reserved for barns, storage buildings, and gathering places for various traditional secret societies. Modern Bamileke homes are made of bricks of either sun-dried mud or of the concrete while roofs are of metal sheeting.

The Bamileke have a population of over 3,500,000 individuals. They speak a number of related languages from the Bantoid branch of the Niger–Congo language family. During the mid 17th century, the Bamileke people’s forefathers left the North to avoid being forced to convert to Islam. They migrated as far south as Foumban.