WHO ARE THE MOORE AND DIOULA PEOPLE?

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Moore and Dioula are the officially recognised indigenous languages of Burkina Faso. In fact, Captain Thomas Sankara, the former President of Burkina Faso, took the name of the country from these two languages. ‘Burkina’ means ‘men of integrity’ in Moore language and ‘Faso’ means ‘father’s house’ in Dioula language. Thus as a metaphorical name, Burkina Faso means ‘the land of integrity’. The inhabitants are known as Burkinabé meaning ‘people of integrity’ in the Moore language. The Moore and Dioula ethnic groups appear to have descended from the powerful kingdoms of Moose and Wagadogo (or Ouagadougou) respectively. At the time of British and French occupation during the 19th century, the country was known as Upper Volta. The people won independence from France following an intense uprising at the end of World War II on the 11th of December 1958.

WHAT’S THE NATURE OF THEIR LANGUAGE AND CULTURE?

While Burkina Faso has more than 60 ethnic groups, the Moore language spoken by the Mossi people are the dominant group. Moore is more widely used than the country’s official language, French. Dioula developed as a trading language and is mostly spoken in western Burkina Faso and northern Cote d’Ivoire. The Burkinabé have defied the diversity of language and culture and remain united by intermarriage as well as loyalty to family and village structures. The ethnic groups are also connected by a special joking relationship that helps to defuse conflict and tension. For example, a Moore man visiting a Dioula family may climb onto the roof of the house and pretend to sleep. The owners of the house will also pretend to chase him off with sticks as a form of play-acting.

Although the Burkinabé have been converted to Islam (40%) and Christianity (10%), the majority of them, including the Moore and Dioula people, still practice animism, a belief that reflects the spirituality of a people who live in harmony with nature. The natural world is made known through the ancestors and can be used for good or evil depending on the people’s moral responsibility. Traditional ritual ceremonies among the ethnic groups involve masked dancing and drumming. Thus oral traditions still play a central role in the country with traditional Burkinabé cultural performances dominating national theatre practices.

WHY STUDY MOORE & DIOULA LANGUAGES?

It is said that language reflects a people’s culture and history. In a world that has been virtually torn apart by conflicts arising from differences in language and cultural identity, perhaps people have something to learn from the Moore and Dioula people of Burkina Faso. The common proverb in Burkina Faso claims that, ‘50% are Muslim, 50% are Christian and 100% are Animist’. This goes to show the high level of religious tolerance among the indigenous people of the country. The Great Mosque of Bobo-Dioulasso was built by people of all the religious faiths together. Indeed, the world has something to learn from a people who have been able to dissolve their cultural differences in favour of religious tolerance.

The famous Dogon creation myth is believed to have originated in the Bandiagara region, close to the historic Moore kingdoms of Wagadogo and Yatenga. Even today, the Moore people have preserved their oral traditions so much that these traditions continue to influence the literature and theatre performances of the Burkinabé people. Thus even though the Dogon people migrated to Mali, remnants of their rich cultural traditions can be found among the Moore (or Mossi) people.
WHO ARE THE FULFUDE (OR FULANI) PEOPLE?

The Fulfulde have been described as ‘one people with many names’. They are popularly known as the Fulani in Hausa language; Fula, Fulah or Foulah in Mandinka; Peul, Peuhl or Peuhl in Wolof (and also by the French); Fula or Futufula in Portuguese and Fulbe or Fulfulde by the English. The typical Fulani (or Fulfulde) are nomadic cattle herders who wandered across West Africa in search of pastures. They are to be found in many parts of West Africa from Lake Chad to the Atlantic coast with more concentrations in Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Senegal, Niger, Nigeria and Cameroon. As their cattle herds became depleted due to environmental conditions, and as they gradually integrated with other cultures, they adopted a more sedentary lifestyle, relying on farming for their livelihood.

WHAT’S THE NATURE OF THEIR LANGUAGE AND CULTURE?

The Fula (or Fulfulde) language is spread over much of West Africa, adopting different names according to linguistic preferences as already mentioned. For instance, Senegalese who speak the Fula (or Fulfulde) language are known as halpulaar meaning ‘speakers of Pulaar’. But in most parts of West Africa, such as Burkina Faso and Cameroon, Fulfulde (or Fula) is the local lingua franca. The Fulani (or Fulfulde) were among the first people to convert to Islam from as early as the eighth century. As the memory of their pastoral religion became lost, and in order to resist taxation, military conscription or acquire more grazing land, they often resorted to waging religious wars in the name of jihads or holy wars. To this end, powerful Muslim theocracies emerged such as the Sokoto caliphate led by Usman dan Fodio. The Sokoto caliphate expanded to become the largest single West African state in the 19th century.

Why study Fulfulde (or Fulani)?

The origins of the Fulani (or Fula) are still contested with some historians suggesting a Middle East background and others arguing for a West African origin. As one of the earliest ethnic groups in the Sahel region, and because of their diverse cultural history, military conquests and subsequent political dominance, the Fulani make a compelling subject of study.

The widespread nature of the Fula (or Fulfulde) language enables easier communication for those who may want to visit West Africa. More importantly is the fact that the Fula themselves can speak other languages, for instance, French and Arabic in Mauritania, Hausa and French in Niger, French and English in Cameroon, Wolof and French in Senegal, Bambara and French in Mali. There are many notable people of Fulani descent. These include Captain Thomas Sankara, former President of Burkina Faso; Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, the founding father of Nigeria; Ibrahim Diallo, Guinean football star; Sulaiman Tejan-Jalloh, Sierra Leonean ambassador to the United Kingdom; Amadou Toure, President of Mali; Cheikh Hamidou Kane, Senegalese author; and Ahmadou Ahidjo, the first President of Cameroon, to mention a few. If success is measured by how one sits on the shoulders of ‘giants’, studying about these distinguished Fulani figures could be the starting point.