LANGUAGE & CULTURE

Bassa is a Niger-Congo Kru language. Bassa language has its own unique alphabet. It has five different tones that are marked using a system of dots and dashes which appear inside vowel letters. There are several dialects including Gbor, Gba Sor, Mabahn, Hwen Gba Kon, Central Bassa, and Rivercess Bassa. Proverbs are a cornerstone to Bassa language. They are typically used by elders (mbong) in formal settings or family meetings. They are typically used when giving advice or solving a complex problem requiring pragmatic thinking. Proverbs also play a crucial role in educating the youth. There are proverbs for nearly every situation one can face in life.

For example, “The elders can always find a crab’s heart” is a translated Bassa proverb that signifies the importance, strength, and wisdom elderly people possess as a result of their varied life experiences. The proverb also signifies the fact that elders are viewed with the utmost importance in Bassa society, and this has religious, social and cultural implications that are far-reaching.

Names are another important part of Bassa language and culture. All the names have meanings ranging from signifying circumstances at one’s birth to hopes and prayers for the child’s life. Some examples of Bassa names are Gadiah - a male name meaning new man, and Mardea - a female name meaning first girl.

STUDYING BASSA IN THE UNITED STATES

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

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WHO SPEAKS BASSA?

Historians have traced the Bassa’s origins back to Egypt nearly six thousand years ago. Due to their migration from Egypt to other parts of Africa, the Bassa in Liberia share a similar history with Bassa groups in other parts of the continent such as Nigeria (Bassa Nge), The Democratic Republic of the Congo (Bassaa la Mpasu), Togo (Basa’r), Senegal (Bassa-Ri), and Cameroon (Basaa Mpoo).

The Early Liberian Bassa settlement flourished via trade in gold, silver, and charcoal. The Bassa have their own traditional religion, but, Christianity is now the most common religion among the Bassa although beliefs in traditional religion are still prominent. Lilolombi is the supreme being and the divine creator in Bassa traditional religion. Lilolombi is neither male nor female as he encompasses principles of both sexes. Lilolombi translates to the greatest because the eldest, and thus signifies the utmost importance of elders in Bassa society. Therefore, Bassa traditional religion also focuses heavily on ancestors. The deceased are seen as existing in another realm and communication with this realm is critical as deceased ancestors are believed to be pivotal in healing, solving problems, and maintaining peace and order in society.

WHY STUDY BASSA?

Bassa is one of the main languages of Liberia and has about 409,000 speakers. There is also a small Bassa speaking population in Sierra Leone. Bassa reside predominantly in Grand Bassa, Rivercess and Montserrado counties in Liberia. Bassa is one of the most studied languages in Liberian schools and Universities. Although the Bassa language is quite prominent in Liberia, the language is slowly dying. Students who wish to help preserve this unique language may wish to study it. It is also an ideal research topic for those studying sociolinguistics. Those interested in government or NGO work, African history, African Art, or traditional cultures of Liberia may also wish to study Bassa.