LANGUAGE & CULTURE

Temne belongs to the Niger-Congo language family. Sometimes it is also called Themne, Time, Timene, Timmanee, and Temen. Taking into account the meaning of the term, “an old man himself,” however “Temne” is preferred to the other spellings. Temne has a wide variety of dialects such as Banta, Konike, Yoni, Bombali, Western Temne (Pil), Sanda, Ribia, Kholifa, Koya, Masingbi, and Malal. Despite a relatively low percentage of lexical similarity between dialects, people claim to understand all the dialects.

Nowadays the populations of Muslims and Christians are increasing among the Temnes, like in the other African countries, but still their traditional religion is more prevalent. Temnes believe that this present world is the second world that God made and they are the second race. So when the present world comes to an end, they believe that its inhabitants are in Hades and God will make another world as he had done for the first and second worlds.

Although they believe in the existence of a ‘Supreme Being,’ they tend to pay more attention to spirits called a-krif, for they think that these spirits have more influence on their conditions than God. The spirits are believed to reside in the wood or bush. As Temne attribute what happens to them to chance or fortune, it is not surprising at all that they have many words conveying “luck,” “fortune,” “good luck,” “bad luck,” “a good krifi” or “a bad krifi.”

Another interesting note about the Temne language is that they have lots of vocabulary that refers to the cultivation of rice, since their primary source of food has traditionally been rice.

STUDYING TEMNE IN THE U.S.

Below is a partial list of the universities in the United States that currently offer TEMNE. For more information, please contact the National African Language Resource Center, or check the NALRC website at http://lang.nalrc.wisc.edu/nalrc.

Michigan State University

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WHY STUDY TEMNE?

Temne means “an old man himself,” and it reflects the Temne people’s belief that their nation will exist forever. Temne is one of the four official languages of Sierra Leone and it is also used as a lingua franca in predominantly Temne-speaking areas, northern half of Sierra Leone. Speakers who use Temne as their first language compose almost 30% of Sierra Leone population and its second language users are estimated 240,000. Furthermore, you can hear radio broadcasts in Temne in Sierra Leone everyday. This means that without the knowledge of Temne, you could not communicate with people in northern province of Sierra Leone.

Temne will be an interesting research area for linguistic researchers as well. Because the Temne are surrounded by mountains, its language has unique characteristics from other neighboring languages. For example, the article is a distinguishing feature of Temne. As in English, Temne has definite and indefinite articles but where they are inserted is not congruous to English. It is prefixed to adjectives and to some pronouns as well as to nouns. That is, proper use of the article in Temne is to form nouns and adjectives from verbs, and to point out the definite and indefinite status of nouns, adjectives, and some pronouns. In addition to the use of articles, other factors of the Temne language might be challenging as well for linguists to explore.

Temne will also be useful for those who would like to learn about Temne culture. The Temne are proud of their long lasting culture. One of the fascinating facets of the Temne culture is the Temne mask. They have developed their own mask culture, which is as famous as Mende masks. They have strong oral tradition of narrative and proverbs. Temne will be a good vehicle through which people can get access to these rich traditions of Temne.

WHO SPEAKS TEMNE?

PEOPLE AND HISTORY

Early history of Sierra Leone is very unclear, but the most widely known fact is that most ethnic groups including Temne came to the eastern coast of Africa in the 1400’s. Around 1400, the first Mende people immigrated to Sierra Leone. In 1540, it is estimated that Temne followed the immigration of Mende and settled down in the northern part of Sierra Leone. Farma Tami was regarded by the Temne both as a great warrior and as the founder of their civilization. According to tradition, he is said to have organized the Temne into strong kingdoms and established their importance all over the country. Farma Tami came from the east with a great army, and conquered all opposition until he reached the estuary of the Rokel River. He established his capital at the town of Robaga, near modern Freetown. Temne elders still recall that Farma taught people the art of war even when there was no gun, and they still regard the town of Robaga as a sacred place. Indeed, every important chief must make a pilgrimage to Robaga and the shrine of great Farma Tami.

In the late 15th century, European ships started to visit the coast regularly to trade manufactured goods for slaves and ivory. In 1787, 331 Africans and 46 Europeans arrived in Sierra Leone, acquired land from Temne regent, King Tom, and established “Province of Freedom.” Through the efforts of British abolitionists and philanthropists, the Province of Freedom was renamed as Freetown and was established for freed and runaway slaves. In 1896, as the British power increased over the Sierra Leone, most parts were proclaimed British protectorate.

Sierra Leone gained independence in 1961, but its modern history is consecutive civil wars. Up to 2002, two civil governments and six military governments had been established and overthrown. In 2002, a peace agreement between the government and Revolutionary United Front (RUF) ended the long lasting civil conflict. And now over 16,000 peace keeping people sent by the United Nations are helping to rebuild Sierra Leone.