In Segou, the Sudano-Sahelian mud architecture typical of West Africa takes on a different expression largely due to the very red clay in the region. The style is referred to locally as ‘Bambara architecture’.

Who Speaks Bamana?

Bamana is spoken by up to 15 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 Côte d’Ivoire and 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, Côte d’Ivoire, Burkina Faso and Senegal. There are smaller groups of speakers in Sierra Leone and Liberia.

Some Famous People of Bamana Descent

Falaba Issa Traore: writer
Issa Bagayogo: musician
Fanta Sacko: musician
Alioune Ba: photographer
Seydou Keita: photographer
Malick Sidibe: photographer
Abdoulaye Konate: artist
Souleymane Cisse: film director
Moussa Konate: writer
Cheick Modibo Diarra: astrophysicist
Soumaila Samake: basketball player
Nakunte Diarra: bogolanfini textile artist

Interesting Facts about Bamana Culture

- The Bamana people are known for making elaborate masks known as Ntomos. These Ntomos have symbolic meaning as the face of an “ideal man” and are drawn with exaggerated features to explain specific qualities. They are also used in initiation ceremony for young men.
- The Bamana people are known for making bogolanfini textile which is worn for wedding and funeral ceremony, and is also used during excision in girl’s initiation.
- Many Bamana people today for a syncretism of traditional religion and Islam.
- The Great Mosque of Djenné is still standing and remains the largest mud-brick structure in the world. Every year, the people in Djenné and the surrounding villages prepare a cured mud mixture to reinforce the exterior walls that have eroded or washed away with the annual storms and floods.
- The Sundiata (or Sonjara) Epic is about the founder of the Old Mali Empire.
- Mansa Musa, the famous king of Old Mali Empire, is among the richest people in history.
Why Study Bamana?

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

The artistic tradition of the Bamana people is rice, 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 mechanism and for community education.

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 Bamaa language will be very helpful to students in linguistics, anthropology, sociology, and history who plan to conduct research in one of the countries mentioned above. For students in comparative linguistics, Bamana could be an interesting language. It borrows many words from French, Arabic and a smaller number of words from English. International workers, Peace Corps volunteers, diplomats, and missionaries will also find it essential to learn Bamana in order to communicate and collaborate with the local populations.

Learn these everyday Phrases!

- Welcome: Idanse; I ni se
- Hello (general greeting): I ni ce
- Thank you: I ni ce
- Sorry: A yafa n ma
- My name is ______ Ne jamu ______
- Have a nice meal: Ka su maya aw kono
- Goodbye: N taara
- Goodnight: I ni su
- Please say that again: Segin a kan
- Have a good trip: Ka sira diya
- I don’t know: A t’a don
- I don’t understand: N m’a faamu

Studying Bamana in the United States:

Please check the “Language Inventory” menu on NALRC website.