WHY STUDY FON?

The famous voodoo cult practiced in the Americas was brought by the slave trade. For instance, the umbanda in Brazil and ouanga in Haiti are voodoo rituals believed to have the power to control humans such as knocking off rivals or bringing about prosperity and success. The knowledge of Fon language and culture can be a gateway to understanding the nature of voodoo religion.

The Fon are also well known for their arts and crafts. Their cultural heritage is rich in bronze sculptures, wooden crafts, masked figures representing gods, kings and animals. For this reason, Fon artworks often fetch high prices on the international markets and can be found in museum exhibitions.

The historical kingdom of Dahomey (now Benin) was the focal point of the Atlantic slave trade. The Bay of Benin was popularly known as the ‘Slave Coast’ because it was the place of embarkment for the slave trade. The Fon exchanged weapons for slaves with European slave traders. They used these firearms to capture the Yoruba, and the Yoruba also captured the Fon, as both sides traded with European slave traders. The complicity of the Fon, and indeed other West African ethnic groups during the slave trade deserves closer study from historians, anthropologists and ethnographers. But such study can only be possible through an understanding of Fon and other related languages, cultures and histories.

WHAT’S THE NATURE OF THEIR LANGUAGE AND CULTURE?

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The polygamous family is primary Fon social unit. A woman and her children occupy a house within a compound. A neighborhood consists of families related through male descent. The eldest male member serves as the lineage head.

Funerals are very important to the Fon. Drummers are hired and dances may be held for days in a row to mourn a loved one. It is believed by the Fon that part of the person is lost in death but the other is reincarnated and comes back in the soul of the next child born to the family.

Please note that Fon is the language that is spoken by the Fon people. It is also called “Fongbe”, “gbe” means language. “Fon” belongs to the Kwa language group, like the languages Adja, Yoruba, Guin, and many others. The languages of the Kwa group are very different from each other, so the several ethnic groups are not able to communicate with each other. French is spoken by the Fon people because they were colonized by the French. French is therefore spoken largely outside their communities. The Fon love to speak their language within their communities. The Fon language has vocal sounds that must be expressed clearly when spoken. Reading and writing the Fon language is challenging but attainable.
WHO ARE THE FON PEOPLE?

The majority of Fon people, more than 2 million, live in Benin (formerly Dahomey). Originally the Fon are believed to have migrated from the Tado area in Togo during the 14th century. Today the Fon are the largest group in Benin constituting 40% of the population. Because many Fon people were victims of the slave trade, they are scattered across West Africa and the American continent. Some Fon people can also be found in Europe, particularly France. As a result of migration, many Fon people now live in America and Europe. The Fon built the cities of Abomey, Dahomey and Quidah which became major centers of the slave trade.

The Fon live in villages and cities. They live in rectangular-shaped houses or huts. These are made of dried mud and covered with thatched or corrugated iron roofs. The Fon men can marry as many women as they wish while the Fon women are allowed to divorce them when they over exaggerate the rights and privileges accorded them. When a Fon man plans to marry, he resides closer to his father in order to learn from his experiences and to perform necessary traditional rites. Divorce and re-marriage is a pronounced act of the Fon people. The lady can choose to go through it and the family as well can be actively involved. The Fon have rulers or kings that are not politically powerful but they exercise their power over their subjects at a local level. Also the division of labor is determined by the gender. The Fon men are either fishermen or farmers while the women only help out after the men have done the strenuous parts. The women are also responsible for the market work and they manufacture materials for the building of houses. The men are usually fishermen and frequently sit around with the elders, play board games or dance with the young stars. Men and women of the Fon, including older siblings, participate equally in raising up their children. Although parents particularly look after their kids, I observed that it is the duty of the society at large because they are all actively involved in training them.

WHAT'S THE NATURE OF THEIR LANGUAGE AND CULTURE?

Like Ewe, Fon belongs to the Gbe language cluster spoken over a large part of West Africa. Other related languages include Aja, Yoruba, Kwa and Guin spoken in Benin, Togo, Nigeria, Gabon and Ghana.

The central feature of Fon culture is voodoo religion. Although some Fon people have been converted to Christianity, approximately 80% still practice voodoo. The word voodoo in Fon language means ‘soul’, ‘spirit’ or ‘the unknown’. Voodoo is thought to have originated from Ifa faith that is based on nature religion. Thus voodoo is a nature religion often mistaken for black magic. Voodoo religious ceremonies often begin with the playing of drums after which believers fall into a trance after being possessed by the spirit. These voodoo spirits are invisible forces believed to mediate between humans and the gods. The spirit forces can be found everywhere such as in the air, water, forests and humans. Voodoo rituals are performed in order to bring wealth, health, love and other human needs.

Other religious features among the Fon are the magic charms known as Bo. These are containers filled with magic that is believed to protect the human carriers. Every Bo has its own meaning. Some can be made of animal skulls and horns and others are made of human bones. Today the Fon also make the Bo out of modern bottles and glass. Fon women are mostly responsible for the market place and craftwork while the men engage in fishing and farming. The traditional Fon economy is based on agriculture. The main crops are corn, cassava and palm oil and yams. Men have the role of clearing and hoeing the fields while both men and women plant; Tending and harvesting of the crops is done by women.