

# KPELLE

## LANGUAGE & CULTURE

Kpelle is a member of the Mande branch of the Western Sudanic subgroup of the Niger Congo family. Mano and Gio (in Liberia) and Mende (in Sierra Leone) are closely related languages. As with other Mande languages, Kpelle shows the absence of noun class markers and the presence of five tonal melodies. The fact that the Mande languages have no system of noun classes distinguishes them from the other Niger-Congo languages, though in some Mande languages remnants of such a system have been found. As with most sub-Saharan African languages, tone is both lexically and grammatically significant in Kpelle.

The Kpelle people are primarily farmers. Rice is their staple crop and is supplemented by cassava, vegetables, and fruits. Cash crops include rice, peanuts, sugarcane, and kola nuts. A typical Kpelle household consists of a man, his several wives, and their children. They live either in rectangular wattle-and-daub huts or in the more traditional round huts - both with thatched roofs. The Kpelle are organized under several paramount chiefs, who, as government officials, serve as mediators between the people and the government, as well as performing their traditional duties of settling disputes, preserving order, and maintaining roads.

Some examples of common Kpelle words are:

cake	kée
no	kpaá
poor	kolo
right	lá mijée
salt	kpolo
water	já

Much of the material available to students who are interested in studying Kpelle is in English. Some important internet links are:

[http://www.isp.msu.edu/AfrLang/Kpelle\\_root.html](http://www.isp.msu.edu/AfrLang/Kpelle_root.html)

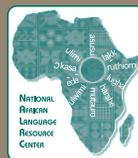
[http://www.ethnologue.com/14/show\\_language.asp?code=KPE](http://www.ethnologue.com/14/show_language.asp?code=KPE)

<http://www.sil.org/silesr/2000/2000-003/Kpelle-Looma-Bandi>.

## STUDYING KPELLE IN THE U.S.

Below is a partial list of some of the universities in the United States that currently offer Kpelle. For more information, please contact the National African Language Resource Center or visit the NALRC website at: <http://www.nalrc.indiana.edu>.

Michigan State University



NATIONAL AFRICAN  
LANGUAGE RESOURCE  
CENTER (NALRC)

Room 3075, Hamilton Lugar  
School of Global and International Studies  
355 N. Eagleson Ave., Indiana University  
Bloomington, IN 47405  
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Website: <http://www.nalrc.indiana.edu>



KPELLE WOMAN

NATIONAL AFRICAN LANGUAGE  
RESOURCE CENTER (NALRC)

## WHY STUDY KPELLE?

Kpelle is spoken throughout Liberia and in the southeastern part of the neighboring Republic of Guinea, where it is generally known as Guerze. In Liberia, there are almost 800,000 speakers who use Kpelle as their first language, about a third of the population. There are approximately 300,000 speakers of Kpelle in Guinea. In these countries, some newspapers and magazines are published in Kpelle and there are also radio broadcasts and a few television programs in the language.

Although English is the official language of Liberia, and French of Guinea, the knowledge of Kpelle is essential to anyone in linguistics, anthropology, history, and folklore who wants to study in this region of West Africa. Individuals working for international organization will also find that they can accomplish their day-to-day tasks more easily if they can speak Kpelle. Tourists, too, will soon discover that knowledge of Kpelle will allow them to enjoy their holidays more if they can communicate with the Kpelle-speaking people of Liberia and Guinea.

## WHO SPEAKS KPELLE?

### PEOPLE AND HISTORY

The Kpelle-speaking people migrated from the savannah area of the western Sudan to what is now Liberia shortly before the end of the 16th century, displacing the indigenous Kwa-speaking people. The Kpelle formed an empire under the leadership of King Kumba. Although they were chiefly agriculturalists, the women were also skilled at pottery and weaving, and the men made spears, hoes, and knives out of metal.

The independent country of Liberia was founded in 1822 by freed slaves from the United States who went to West Africa as part of Marcus Garvey's "Back to Africa" movement. African-Americans were the driving force behind most Liberian institutions for more than 150 years. When Harvey S. Firestone leased land for planting rubber at Harbel, Liberia, in the 1920s, he created a demand for tappers and led to the first of several Kpelle labor migrations. There was yet another wave of Kpelle labor migration in the 1960s because of the opening of large iron mines in the western part of the country. Urban migration accelerated in the 1970s, leading to the establishment of large Kpelle-speaking communities, especially in Monrovia, the capital city.

African-American political dominance in Liberia contributed to the formation of political, economic, cultural, and military ties to the United States. The Liberian constitution, justice system, and legislative bodies are based on their United States counterparts. Because of the political and economic stability of the country, many United States companies opened branches in Liberia. A coup d'état in the late 1980s brought the first native Africans to power. Until then, power had been held by the descendants of the freed American slaves. Now that the political strife from several civil wars has come to an end, Liberians have started to rebuild their infrastructure. Some Liberian officials have suggested that once Kpelle has an official orthography it should be designated alongside English as a national language.



Kpelle family



Booker Washington Institute of Liberia



Kpelle students