

LANGUAGE & CULTURE

The Kru languages belong to the Niger–Congo language family and are spoken by the Kru people from the southeast of Liberia to the east of Ivory Coast. The term “Kru” is of unknown origin. According to Westermann (1952) it was used by Europeans to denote a number of tribes speaking related dialects. Marchese (1989) notes the fact that many of these peoples were recruited as “crew” by European seafarers; “the homonymy with crew is obvious, and is at least one source of the confusion among Europeans that there was a Kru/crew tribe.” Historian Andrew Dalby noted the historical importance of the Kru languages for their position at the crossroads of African-European interaction and wrote that “Kru and associated languages were among the first to be encountered by European voyagers on what was then known as the Pepper Coast, a center of the production and export of Guinea and melegueta pepper; a once staple African seaborne trade”. The Kru languages are known for some of the most complex tone systems in Africa, rivaled perhaps only by the Omotic languages.

Linguists use the name Kru to refer to a linguistic group within the larger larger Niger-Congo language family. Peoples speaking language in this Kru group include Bete, Dida, Grebo, Wobe and the Kru people themselves.

STUDYING CHOKWE 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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KRU



BHETE-KRU WOMAN IN TRADITIONAL DRESS, IVORY COAST

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WHO SPEAKS KRU

The origin of Kru people is still historically unknown. The legend has it that they migrated from the sea to their current habitats. Historians, These Kwa-speaking people were related but with distinct cultures were all lumped together under the collective term “Kru”, a corruption of the original “Krao” by Europeans with whom they traded as far back as the fifteenth century. Successive waves of migration brought them overland from the east and north, and by the sea. Those coming from the Gedeh forests to the north claimed Mount Pahn in the Putu Range as their ancestral home. Geological flights in the 1950s confirmed the remains of a vil-lage on the summit of the mountain, half-shrouded in clouds of mist and ancient mystery.

The Kru people inhabit a homeland in coastal southeastern Liberia and neighboring Cote d’Ivoire (Ivory Coast). Some Kru have also migrated to the neighboring Sierra Leone to work as fishermen and dockworkers. The Kru along with the Grebo resisted Maryland settlers’ efforts to control their trade. They were also infamous amongst early European slave raiders as being especially averse to capture. Their reputation was such that their value as slaves was less than that of other African peoples, because they would so frequently attempt to escape or to take their own lives when captured.

Some of the Krus and Grebos had a number of western-educated people living among them for decades. Most of which were educated in Sierra Leone, on the Gold Coast, and in Britain. The Kru also engaged in trade, migrant labor, and seafaring. They established fishing and migrant worker settlements along the coast as far east as Cameroon and as far west as Freetown and Cape Verde. Their skill with canoes in the treacherous surf waters was already world renowned by the 1700s, when they served on British merchant and war ships, and even established small settlements in Liverpool and in the Americas.

WHY STUDY KRU

Recent documentation has noted “Kru societies can now be found along the coast of Monrovia, Liberia to Bandama River in Cote d’Ivoire” “Villages maintain their ties based on presumed common descent, reinforced by ceremonial exchanges and gifts”. The Kru people and their languages, although now many speak English as a second language, are said to be “dominant in the southwest region where the forest zone reaches the coastal lagoons”. Nevertheless, the Kru people rely on the forest for farming supplemented by hunting for their livelihood.

The Kru languages include many subgroups such as Kuwaa, Grebo, Belle, Belleh, Kwaa and many others. Categorization of communities based on cultural distinctiveness, historical or ethnic identity and socio-political autonomy may have brought about the large number of distinct Kru dialects; “Although the natives were in many respects similar in type and tribe, every village was an independent state; there was also very little intercommunication”. Overall, in 2010, Kru and associated languages were spoken by 95 percent of the approximate 3.5 million people in Liberia.



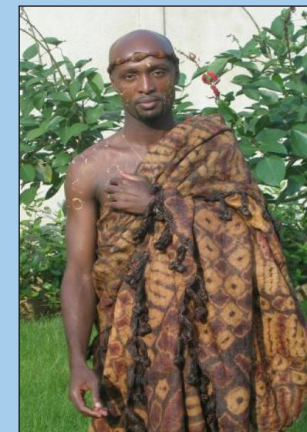
Ivorian Kru chiefs wearing their tappa dress



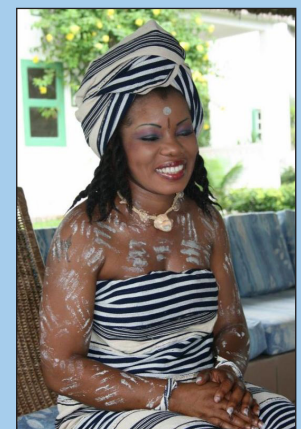
Kru people performing traditional dance, Ivory Coast



Grebo-Kru girl performing traditional dance, Liberia



kru man in traditional clothing



Guere (kru) woman