

# MENDE

## LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Mende belongs to the Niger-Congo language family. Sometimes it is called Boumpe, Hulo, Kossa, or Kosso. It has several dialects such as Kpa, Ko, Waanjama, and Sewawa, but most of them are intelligible by the Mende because they have 92% to 98% lexical similarity with each other.

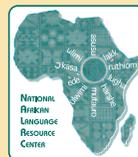
The Mende culture consists of two main societies—the Poro and the Sande. The primary role of both societies are the same in that they intend to teach people the expectations of the community, but they are distinguishable from each other by group members' gender. The Poro is for men and the Sande is for women. Poro means “laws of ancestors” thereby imparting power to the Poro from ancestor spirits. The Poro is in charge of settling disputes, controlling fishing and harvesting, and regulating the economy and trading. In the Poro, Mende boys are taught bridge and trap making, basketry and weaving, traditional law and customs, and the art of enduring hardship and pain.

On the other hand, a girl child is initiated into another society called the Sande. They are trained for the adult roles they will soon encounter. Mende girls are instructed in child care, homemaking, sexual matters, and the proper attitude towards husbands and authority. In the Sande society, “sowei” represents the personification of the society's spirit, medicine, and the most important masked dancer. In particular, their masks are relatively very well known even in the western world. The dance attendants keep the sowei masks in the same enclosure where Sande medicine is kept. It is hoped that through its continual use, the spirits will agree to possess the dancer during the ceremony. Interestingly, this is the only known masking tradition in Africa exclusively worn by women.

## STUDYING MENDE IN THE U.S.

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

Michigan State University



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A WOMAN PREPARES POTATO LEAVES FOR GREEN LEAF STEW

NATIONAL AFRICAN LANGUAGE  
RESOURCE CENTER (NALRC)

## WHY STUDY MENDE?

The term Mende (or in the earliest literature, Mendi) was originally applied to the country where the Mende speakers live. There had been separate terms for their language (*Mende yi ei*) and for the people who speak Mende (*Mendebla*). Since Europeans used to apply Mende even to the language and the people, Mende has been widely used referring to the Mende language and its people.

Mende is one of the major indigenous languages spoken in Sierra Leone. In Sierra Leone, English is an official language and Krio is the trade language, but in the southern part of Sierra Leone, people mainly speak their indigenous language Mende. Mende has been reported to have gains to the extent that it is replacing another indigenous language Sherbo. Furthermore, it is widely understood even in the non-Mende community in Sierra Leone. This means that visitors to this part of Sierra Leone should know Mende in order to communicate with the Mende people, who have lived there since their ancestors immigrated from Sudan around 2000 years ago.

Mende may provide an interesting research area to the people of various disciplines such as history, anthropology, and linguistics. Moreover, Mende is a fascinating topic for artists or archaeologists, for they are very famous for their artistic talents and works. Most Mende art has the purpose of initiation and healing and includes wooden masks, twin figures, and medicine objects. Utilitarian objects such as heddle pulleys are decorated with carved heads or other beautiful designs. In particular, Mende takes pride in its traditional masks such as Sande mask worn by women and the helmet mask carved from green wood. In order to explore all these treasures of Mende in depth, learning their language will be most useful.

## WHO SPEAKS MENDE? PEOPLE AND HISTORY

The Mende forms the largest single cultural group in Sierra Leone and their culture has been shared by people living around them. Mende is spoken by about one and half million people in the southern half of Sierra Leone, which is almost 30.9 % of the population. While Mende use Krio as the lingua franca in formal situations, they prefer Mende, their indigenous language in informal situations. In addition, 600,000 people speak Mende as their second language. The population who speaks Mende is expanding along the coast and to the south and east.

The Mende are said to have migrated from the Sudan. Their oral traditions tell us that their migration and settlement were peaceful and that it had occurred gradually from 200 to 1500 A.D. In the Middle Ages, the expansion of powerful kingdoms, such as Mali and Songhay, forced indigenous peoples into the coastal rain forests. Because of the high density of the rain forests, it is assumed that they might have resorted to hunting for substance rather than cultivation of land for agricultural purposes.

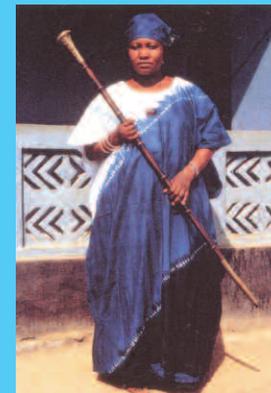
The Mende have cultural and physical diversity even though they are considered one ethnic group. This may be because the immigrants came from a wide range of places or because they intermarried with the people who had originally lived there. The Mende adopted ideas they found to be useful from the coastal Bullom people. And as a result many artistic traditions are closely related to the Bullom people.



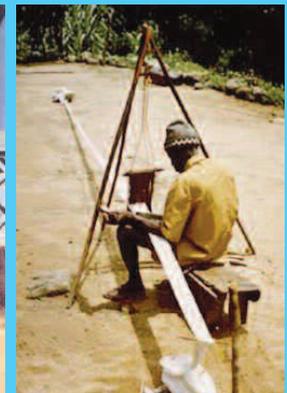
A palm wine tapper.



Sowei in costume with attendants.



Paramount chief of Kondo Leppiama.



Weaver in the Sherbo area.