

# SONINKE

## LANGUAGE & CULTURE

Soninke language belongs to the Northern Branch of Mande spoken by the Soninke people of West Africa. It enjoys the status of a national language in Mali, Senegal and Mauritania. The language is relatively homogeneous, with only slight phonological, lexical, and grammatical variations. Linguistically, its nearest relatives are the Bozo languages, centered around the Inner Niger Delta. It may be that the Imraguen and Nemadi are dialects of Soninke, but this is not certain. It is spoken from the intersection of north east

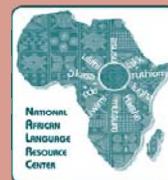
Senegal, south central Mauritania, and west/southwest Mali, to a line running east roughly along the Mali-Mauritanian border. It is also spoken in parts of Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, and Niger. The Grimes (1996) gives a figure of 1,126,000 speakers. Voegelin and Voegelin (1977) estimated the total number of Soninke speakers at 457,000 and Platiel (1978) 520000.



*Soninke woman from Senegal pouring traditional tea*

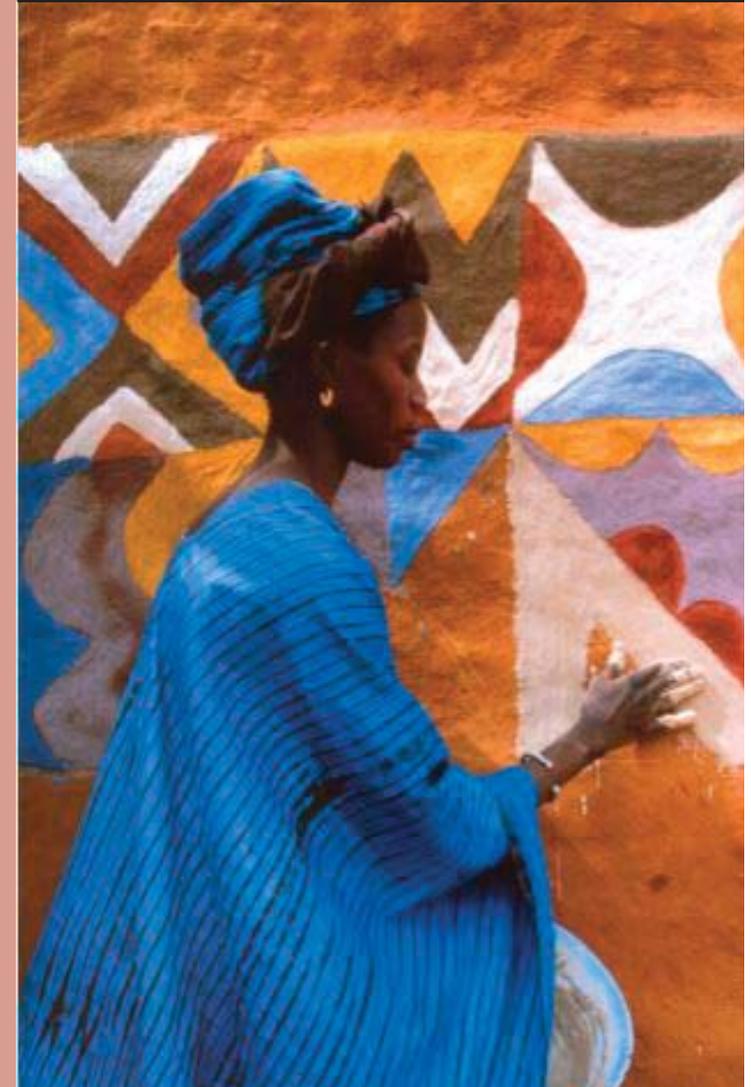
## STUDYING SONINKE IN THE UNITED STATES

Please contact the National African Language Resource Center, or check the NALRC website at <http://www.nalrc.indiana.edu/>



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SONINKE WOMAN

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## WHO SPEAKS SONINKE

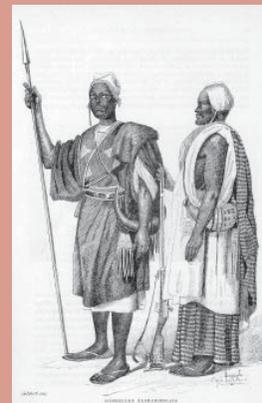
The Soninke (also called Sarakole, Seraculeh, or 'Serahuli) are a Mandé people who descend from the Bafour and are closely related to the Imraguen of Mauritania. They speak the Soninke language, a Mande language. They were the founders of the ancient empire of Ghana c. 750-1240 CE. Subgroups of Soninke include the Maraka and Wangara. After contact with Muslim Almoravid traders from the north around 1066, Soninke nobles of neighboring Takrur were among the first ethnic groups from Sub-Saharan West Africa to embrace Islam. When the Ghana empire dispersed, the resulting diaspora brought Soninkes to Mali, Senegal, Mauritania, Gambia, and Guinea-Bissau. The structural social or The Soninke share a very conservative culture, inherganzation from their forefather by founders of the Ghana Empire This empire constituted the major part of the Soninke history and lifestyle. The first ruler of this empire was said to be Dingha Cisse, who it is said had a semi-divine status. He came with his people from "the East", either Mali or possibly what is modern day Senegal, and created a coalition against the neighboring tribes and "nomadic raiders". Some believe that after long battles with the Berbers, Cisse married the three daughters of their leader and created an impressive alliance.



*Soninke people in Mali*



*Miss Soninke*



*Soninke Soldiers*

## WHY STUDY SONINKE

Soninke people today live throughout West Africa, but remain centered around the former homelands of the Ghana Empire and the valley of the upper Senegal river and along the Mali - Senegal border between Nara and Niore du Sahel. Migrations seeking labor, encouraged under French colonial rule have led many Soninke to build communities in Dakar and other large cities in Africa and beyond. There is a large and growing Soninke community in Paris, France. Trade networks, famously led by the Wangara mercantile confederations, spread Soninke people and culture throughout most of Mali and Senegal, southern Mauritania, northern Burkina Faso, as well as parts of the Gambia, and Guinea-Bissau. Maraka - Soninke merchant communities and plantations (centered just north of the city of Segou, Mali) were an economic mainspring under the Bambara Empire, and built trade routes throughout the region. Today the Soninke number above 1 million.



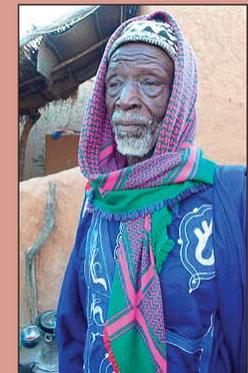
*Soninke men playing traditional drum*



*Soninke women dancing*



*Soninke Women of Mauritania  
Painting Their Hut*



*Soninke man in his  
traditional attire*