

1. Description

1.1 Name(s) of society, language, and language family: Kpelle Society, Kpelle Language, also known as *Guerze* in French, Macro language of Liberia. Classification: Niger-Congo, Mande, Western, Central-Southwestern, Southwestern, Kpelle

1.2 ISO code (3 letter code from ethnologue.com): [kpe]

1.3 Location (latitude/longitude): Macrolanguage across Guinea and Liberia, 10.2716° N, 11.7188° W and 6.3636° N, 9.4659° W respectively.

1.4 Brief history: “Probably began moving to the Liberian area during the 16th century from the neighboring Guinea area.” (Dunn et al)

1.5 Influence of missionaries/schools/governments/powerful neighbors: The Liberian government imposes indirect rule over Kpelle chiefdoms

1.6 Ecology (natural environment): “The terrain in the area includes swamps, hills and, in lowland areas, rivers. May through October brings their rainy season with an annual rainfall from 180 to 300 centimeters. The Kpelle territory sees the lowest temperatures dropping to 19 degrees C with the average temp around 36 degree C.” (Erchak)

1.7 Population size, mean village size, home range size, density 487,000 living in Liberia, (AMRC) and 308,000 living in Guinea. (ethnologue) “Kpelle villages generally accommodate between 50 and 600 persons living in 10 to 150 huts; these numbers may be considerably higher if the village is an important one or is located on a motor road. Villages are often surrounded by considerably smaller farm hamlets; in addition, some families or even individuals live alone, away from a village or hamlet. Larger villages, called “towns” by the Kpelle, are divided into “quarters,” named subunits with their own quarter-chiefs. Farms are located away from villages, sometimes at a considerable distance. Villages are generally several kilometers apart, with farm hamlets, if any, dispersed around each village and uninhabited bush between each village-hamlet cluster. Many Kpelle today live as refugees in Guinea and Monrovia because of the civil war.” (Erchak)

2. Economy

2.1 Main carbohydrate staple(s): “Dry swidden rice is the Kpelle staple and the focus of Kpelle life. The Kpelle conceptualize the word “work” to mean “rice cultivation.” One crop a year is harvested in an annual slash-and-burn cycle; land is generally used once and then left fallow for at least seven years. Cassava (manioc) is the second-most important staple crop.” (Erchak)

2.2 Main protein-lipid sources: “Hunting and trapping contribute occasional meat to the diet, although fishing contributes a larger proportion of protein source. Gathering is far more important, providing palm wine, palm nuts (for palm oil), kola nuts, and many wild fruits, fungi, vegetables, herbs, roots, and greens.” (Erchak)

2.3 Weapons: Bow and arrow, blowguns?:

2.4 Food storage:

2.5 Sexual division of production: “The Kpelle division of labor is determined primarily by gender. Men clear the bush, and women plant. Men hunt and occasionally fish and gather palm wine, palm nuts, and kola nuts. Women do most of the fishing and gathering. Women weave nets and most baskets, whereas men plait mats, make furniture, weave some types of mat, and, where it is still practiced, weave homespun cloth. Although all Kpelle are farmers, some further division results from knowledge of politics and “medicine” (or “magic”). A chief, for example, may be somewhat better off than others.” (Erchak)

2.6 Land tenure: “Because population density is low, there is little land pressure in most of Kpelleland. The first man to settle in a previously uninhabited area is called the “owner of the land,” a title with ritual as well as secular significance. He, or if deceased, his descendant, allots land to those who ask, and permission is rarely refused.” (Erchak)

2.7 Ceramics:

2.8 Specified (prescribed or proscribed) sharing patterns:

2.9 Food taboos:

2.10 Canoes/watercraft?

3. Anthropometry

3.1 Mean adult height (m and f):

3.2 Mean adult weight (m and f):

4. Life History, mating, marriage

4.1 Age at menarche (f):

4.2 Age at first birth (m and f):

4.3 Completed family size (m and f): "Apart from compound families of polygynists, the normal residential group is the elementary family; married sons and daughters, even if they live in the same village, invariably have their own households." (Gibbs) "The polygynous family, with each wife and her children having their own hut, is the ideal form, but it is quite rare. It is more likely that all members of a polygynous family live in the same house, with each wife having her own room. Often one wife will live elsewhere, even several kilometers away. Monogamous nuclear and extended families are on the increase." (Erchak)

4.4 Inter-birth-interval (f):

4.5 Age first marriage (m and f):

4.6 Proportion of marriages ending in divorce: "At least 20 percent of Kpelle marriages end in divorce, which can be quite complex and protracted. Grounds include infertility and adultery for husbands, and physical abuse and nonsupport for wives. Divorce negotiations involve property, especially when substantial bride-price is involved." (Erchak)

4.7 Percent marriages polygynous, percent males married polygynously: "Although monogamy has become more common in the late twentieth century, polygyny remains the preferred marital type." (Erchak)

4.8 Bride purchase (price), bride service, dowry?: "Anthropologist James Gibbs (1965) describes six types of union recognized by the Kpelle, ranging from the most prestigious (full bride-price paid outright with patrilocal residence) to casual liaisons. The Kpelle prefer marriage with bride-price, although bride-service is acceptable as well. Patrilocal postmarital residence is preferred, but neolocality associated with bride-service is quite common for very young couples." (Erchak)

4.9 Inheritance patterns: "A man's authority, property, and younger wives are inherited either by his oldest surviving brother or his oldest son. Obligations, debts, personality, and food taboos, among other things, are inherited patrilineally." (Erchak)

4.10 Parent-offspring interactions and conflict: Married children often leave the home to establish their own households, but occasionally if they are to stay with their parents after marriage, they would live with the man's mother. (Erchak)

4.11 Homosexual activities, social attitudes towards homosexuals:

4.12 Pattern of exogamy (endogamy):

4.13 What is the belief of the role of males in conception; is paternity partible? Are these "other fathers" recognized? Paternity is not partible.

4.14 What is the belief of the mother's role in procreation exactly? (e.g., "receptacle in which fetus grows")

4.15 Is conception believed to be an incremental process (i.e., semen builds up over time)?

4.16 Occurrence of sexual coercion, rape

4.17 Preferential category for spouse (e.g., cross cousin) No preference, in group or out of group. (Erchak)

4.18 Do females enjoy sexual freedoms? Yes, but only when they have not been paid for by a groom are women able to engage in loose sexual relationships. (Gibbs)

4.19 Evidence of giving gifts to extramarital partners or extramarital offspring

4.20 If mother dies, whose raises children? The father's mother. (Bellman)

4.21 Adult sex ratio: number of adult males divided by number of (reproductive) females

4.22 Evidence for couvades No

4.23 Different distinctions for potential fathers (e.g., lesser/younger vs. major/older)

4.24 Kin avoidance and respect?

4.24 Joking relationships? Yes, but a man cannot be joking around with the women of his family.

4.25 Patterns of descent (e.g., bilateral, matrilineal) for certain rights, names or associations “A man's authority, property, and younger wives are inherited either by his oldest surviving brother or his oldest son. Obligations, debts, personality, and food taboos, among other things, are inherited patrilineally.” (Erchak)

4.26 Incest avoidance rules “A man may not marry or make sexual jokes with a woman who has the same last name.” (Gibbs)

4.27 Is there a formal marriage ceremony? Yes.

4.28 In what way(s) does one get a name, change their name, and obtain another name?

4.29 Is marriage usually (or preferred to be) within community or outside community? (m/f difference?) “The band itself, as a structured unit, is not a factor in regulating marriage. People may marry within their bands or without them if relationships permit” (Gibbs)

4.30 Are marriages arranged? Who arranges (e.g., parents, close kin)?

4.31 Evidence for conflict of interest over who marries who:

Warfare/homicide

4.14 Percent adult (male) deaths due to warfare:

4.15 Outgroup vs ingroup cause of violent death:

4.16 Reported causes of in-group and out-group killing: “The Kpelle engaged in sporadic warfare until the late 1930s.” (Erchak)

The Kpelle coordinate open warfare between villages through the leaderships of the villages respective Poro leaderships. Battles are rare, but when fought are over territorial disputes. (Bellman)

4.17 Number, diversity and relationship with neighboring societies (external relations): “The Kpelle interact most frequently with the neighboring Mende, Loma, Mano, and Bassa. They share the Poro complex of secret ritual societies with all of these peoples except the Bassa; initiates may even attend certain secret rituals in these other ethnic areas. The Kpelle also trade with the Muslim Vai and Mandingo, who frequently live among them in small numbers, as do some Lebanese merchants and U.S. missionaries and Peace Corps volunteers. An Episcopal-controlled four-year college is located in the middle of Kpelleland.” (Erchak)

4.18 Cannibalism? No

5. Socio-Political organization and interaction

5.1 Mean local residential (village) group size: 50-150 people (see population density above)

5.2 Mobility pattern: (seasonality): Permanent (Agricultural)

5.3 Political system: (chiefs, clans etc, wealth or status classes): “The structure of the Kpelle court system parallels that of the political organization. In Liberia the highest court of a tribal authority and the highest tribal court chartered by the Government is that of a paramount chief. A district chief's court is also an official court. Disputes may be settled in these official courts or in unofficial courts, such as those of town chiefs or quarter elders. In addition to this, grievances are settled informally in moots, and sometimes by associational groupings such as church counsels or cooperative work groups.” (Podolefsky, and Brown)

5.4 Post marital residence: “Patrilocal postmarital residence is preferred, but neolocality associated with bride-service is quite common for very young couples.” (Erchak)

5.5 Territoriality? (defined boundaries, active defense): See land tenure (2.6)

5.6 Social interaction divisions ? (age and sex):

5.7 Special friendships/joking relationships:

5.8 Village and house organization:

5.9 Specialized village structures (mens' houses):

5.10 Sleep in hammocks or on ground or elsewhere? Ground

5.11 Social organization, clans, moieties, lineages, etc: The secret societies of the Poro and Sande, respectively male and female, are far-reaching socio-political organizations all along the Ivory Coast. Although the organizations are fairly wide spread, the secrecy makes them not well integrated with one-another. The association of members therefore relies not on membership in a group, but on interactional context.

5.12 Trade: “Markets were introduced by the Americo-Liberians and are still not found in remote roadless parts of Kpelleland, but, in less remote areas, lively weekly markets are an important event. In large commercial towns lining the major arteries, one may find market produce nearly every day, in addition to many Lebanese- and Syrian-run shops.” (Erchak)

5.13 Indications of social hierarchies?

6. Ritual/Ceremony/Religion (RCR)

6.0 Time allocation to RCR:

6.1 Specialization (shamans and medicine): “Medicine men, medicine women, and shamans of various types also often enjoy considerable prestige and influence, particularly within the framework of the numerous secret (or sacred) societies. The blacksmith, for example, is always a powerful medicine man who is believed by many to be an important ritual leader within the Poro society for men. Wealthy, influential men are called “outstanding men” or “big shots” and are very much admired and often envied.” (Erchak)

6.2 Stimulants:

6.3 Passage rituals (birth, death, puberty, seasonal): “Poro: A male sodality found among several groups in central and western Liberia, including the Vai, Gola, Dei, Mende, Bande, Loma, Kpelle and part of the Ma. The society serves two primary functions. It is the main institution to enculturate young males and to formally carry them through the rite of passage from child to adult. In addition, the elders of the Poro serve as the intermediaries between the ancestors and the living, and thus act as the ultimate arbiters of asocial actions which affect the society. The female counterpart of this organization is the Sande society. The main function of the Sande is to serve as an enculturative institution and to make the transition of girls into women. The Sande sessions in the past have lasted for three years.” (Dunn et al)

6.4 Other rituals: “Sacrifices are made to ancestors and other spirits, often at crossroads. Rituals and ritual knowledge are secret and, in general, associated with the secret medicine societies. Accordingly, most important Kpelle rituals are not accessible to observers. One exception is the coming-out ceremonies following initiatory seclusion.” (Erchak)

6.5 Myths (Creation):

6.6 Cultural material (art, music, games): “The Kpelle design various musical instruments, weave homespun cloth and several types of mat, and carve crude sculptures. Their most beautiful and refined artistic creations are the elegant and awesome spirit masks associated with the secret societies.” (Erchak)

6.7 Sex differences in RCR: “The Kpelle recognize three principal types of shaman (medicine person of either sex): those associated with the Poro and Sande societies, those associated with other specific medicine societies, and those who are independent. The first two types mainly conduct rituals; the third type, and occasionally the second, primarily heal. The Kpelle also utilize diviners who analyze problems for a fee.”

6.8 Missionary effect: “Whereas some 10 to 25 percent of the Kpelle are nominal Christians (usually Lutheran) in those areas where missionaries are very active, and whereas a handful embrace Islam, the vast majority hold traditional animistic beliefs.” (Erchak)

6.9 RCR revival:

6.10 Death and afterlife beliefs: “Death is a passing into a spiritual realm that coexists with the material realm. The deceased become ancestors, who seem to become increasingly vague and to move further away from villages and into the bush as their memory becomes less distinct in the minds of their living relatives.” (Erchak)

6.11 Taboo of naming dead people? No

6.12 Is there teknonymy? No

6.13 Briefly describe religion (animism, ancestor worship, deism, magic, totems etc.) “Kpelle religion is rather inchoate, focused vaguely on God, the ancestors, and forest spirits and more sharply on the secret medicine societies and the masked spirits who operate within those societies. The Kpelle recognize a High God who created the world and then retired. They believe in a variety of lesser spirits or genii, including ancestors, personal totems, water spirits, and spirits in magically powerful masks. Witchcraft and sorcery figure prominently in the belief system.” (Erchak)

7. Adornment

7.1 Body paint:

7.2 Piercings:

7.3 Haircut:

7.4 Scarification:

7.5 Adornment (beads, feathers, lip plates, etc.):

7.6 Ceremonial/Ritual adornment: Medicine men, moderators carry a big stick (kpung) to wave around and look official (Podolefsky)

7.7 Sex differences in adornment:

7.8 Missionary effect: The culture of clothing has been affected less by missionaries and more by the fact that the Kpelle inhabit Liberia, so there is a very large western influence there.

7.9 Cultural revival in adornment:

8. Kinship systems

8.1 Sibling classification system:

8.2 Sororate, levirate: It is not unusual for a man to be married to two women who are sisters, but the death of a woman does not necessitate the presence of the sister to fulfill the role.

8.3 Other notable kinship typology, especially cross-cousin (MBD/FZD) typology (Crow/Hawaiian/Omaha etc.): "Iroquois cousin terminology with bifurcate-merging avuncular terms is used." (Erchak)

9. Other interesting cultural features (list them):

The Kpelle Moot. The judicial system of the Kpelle is organized in two ways: one by a person who would want to make a complaint. Everyone involved and close relatives assemble at a house and an elder from the Poro (kpung holder) would mediate a discussion about it. The focus of the ceremony is to restore group harmony and the kpung holder performs many blessings throughout the meeting, ending the discussion acting that everyone please act with good grace and unity. The end result normally is a group catharsis as everyone present is able to speak their minds in turn. The second part, the more official part is the court system, which is headed by the village chief and models the Liberian government. "The court is particularly effective in settling cases such as assault, possession of illegal charms, or theft where the litigants are not linked in a relationship which must continue after the trial" and the court is markedly coercive and abusive. (Podolefsky)

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