

1. Description

1.1 Name(s) of society, language, and language family:

Mende, Mende, Mende

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

men (4)

1.3 Location (latitude/longitude):

The mende inhabit a region of 12,000 square miles in the central and eastern region of the Sierra Leone Protectorate (2)

1.4 Brief history:

The mende are fairly new culture that is documented as appearing around the 1600's. Originally, the culture is documented as being slightly peaceful. The culture concentrated mainly on agriculture rather than war and neighboring peoples. However, at some point, the Mende became a society in which war was prevalent. It is suggested that this war was introduced with the coming of the Europeans. Today, the Mende are still an agriculturally based society that is slightly warlike. (2)

1.5 Influence of missionaries/schools/governments/powerful neighbors:

The Sierra Leone Settlement was taken over as a crown colony in 1806; but the British appear to have made little or no contact with the Mende until the later half of the century. Around 1876 there was a push to travel into the hinterland rather than remain on the coast. This is when the British began to take over the Mende's neighboring groups. However, the British never fully gained control of the Mende. The British regiments and Mende chiefs signed a peace treaty stating that trade shall be kept open and the war fences around Mende towns removed. (2)

1.6 Ecology (natural environment):

Climate has a dry season from October to May and a wet season from June to October. Humidity, rainfall and sunshine greatly vary depending on the time of year, the terrain and how close the region sits to the equator (1)

1.7 Population size, mean village size, home range size, density

Mende live in chiefdoms. A town is considered large if it is comprised of 200 or more houses. The population is between 1200 and 2000 people per town. It resembles that of an English village- the same size, density and population except that the area occupied is less (2)

2. Economy

2.1 Main carbohydrate staple(s):

Rice, Pepper, Groundnuts, Beniseed and Palm Oil are all grown for local consumption (1)

2.2 Main protein-lipid sources:

Main lipid sources are wild game and things that the Mende trade/buy for (2)

2.3 Weapons: Bow and arrow, blowguns?:

Warfare was usually fought hand to hand combat with spears, knives and things easily held or thrown at close range (2)

2.4 Food storage:

Food storage is not mentioned, usually food is brought straight to market after it is harvested, or it is cooked for consumption of the community (2)

2.5 Sexual division of production:

Work is divided by gender: men attend to the heavy work of clearing the land for planting rice while women are occupied with cleaning and pounding rice, fishing, and weeding the planted crops (1)

2.6 Land tenure:

Access to land and rights to its occupation and use for purposes of farming derive from membership of certain families or descent groups. The accepted ancestral rule is that the individual who first worked that piece of land gained the right to use it and occupy it as long as he lived. (2)

2.7 Ceramics:

specific ceramics are not mentioned

2.8 Specified (prescribed or proscribed) sharing patterns:

In very early times, a large kill would be divided among the community and others would settle around the kill until everyone had eaten their fill (2)

2.9 Food taboos:

No food taboos, however, it is customary for a portion of meals to be offered to the spirits before mealtime. It is also customary to bring the Sande and Poro meals when they are in session. (2)

2.10 Canoes/watercraft?

Canoes are mentioned, but are not an integral part of life (2)

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):

14 or 15 (2)

4.2 Age at first birth (m and f):

- The first birth will happen shortly after marriage. Marriage will occur after the woman has completed her Sande rituals during mid adolescence (2)
- 4.3 Completed family size (m and f):
 For well to do men, a family size may contain a dozen women and their children (2)
 For the common labor class of men, single families are common. These men also tend to have “friendships” with married women or with women that have left their husbands. (2)
- 4.4 Inter-birth-interval (f):
 3 years (2)
 As long as a woman is suckling her child, it is prohibited for any man to have sex with her because it might kill the suckling baby. The suckling last approximately 3 years. After the child is weaned, the mother can begin to reproduce again (2)
- 4.5 Age first marriage (m and f):
 Every woman who has passed adolescence should have a husband (2)
 In old days, men had fewer opportunity of obtaining enough bride wealth to secure a wife at a young age. Therefore men did not usually marry until their mid 30’s. Now, a man has more opportunity to secure bride wealth so men are able to get married in their early to mid 20’s. (2)
- 4.6 Proportion of marriages ending in divorce:
 Divorce is rare. A woman who leaves her husband for any reason is known as a “run away woman”. A man without a wife or a woman without a husband is regarded as unfortunate and is not a respected status. (2)
- 4.7 Percent marriages polygynous, percent males married polygynously:
 Polygyny is an integral part of Mende society. Polygynous marriages represent high status. This is partly because with more wives, there is more labor to produce greater amount of agricultural goods. Also, a family can increase at a faster rate if more females are reproducing.(2)
- 4.8 Bride purchase (price), bride service, dowry?:
 Generally, men acquire their first wife with the help his father’s (or other close male relative) money. However, usually the offering is small for the first wife and whether or not she will marry him depends on his probability of economic success in the future. He will then acquire a plot of land on which to farm and make a home with his wife. After his farm is successful he will take the money from his crops and try to buy more wives (2)
 A bride may also be “purchased” as an infant. When she is born and throughout her childhood her husband will bring her goods and provide for her in small ways. He will also pay for her initiation into the Sande and when she is of age, a bride wealth will be decided upon and she will be married to him (2)
- 4.9 Inheritance patterns:
 A man’s wives are inheritable by his brothers, sons and nephews (2)
- 4.10 Parent-offspring interactions and conflict:
 Children learn to address all adults according to sex, age and social status. Children are respectful and learn how to act in social settings by following their parents around so they can learn what their tasks will be when they reach adolescence. Children are fed irregularly but are often fed until their stomachs are “hard” (2)
- 4.11 Homosexual activities, social attitudes towards homosexuals:
- 4.12 Pattern of exogamy (endogamy):
 Exogamy or endogamy between members of the common class is prevalent (2)
 Endogamy is dominant between the upper/ruling class (2)
- 4.13 What is the belief of the role of males in conception; is paternity partible? Are these “other fathers” recognized?
- 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
 The mende classify sexual coercion and rape as “woman damage”. Woman damage is not uncommon in the Mende community. Woman damage is classified as having sex with an immature girl, having sex without permission of the woman or her family, and deflowering a prospective wife without her consent. Woman damage is regarded as a despicable act and both parties must be cleansed afterwards. The man must also attempt to make amends with her and her family or whomever is in charge of the woman (2)
- 4.17 Preferential category for spouse (e.g., cross cousin)
 No preferential categories for spouses, cousins are allowed to marry but only on the mother’s side. As long as the man exhibits a hard work ethic and is able to provide for his family, the Mende will allow their daughter’s to marry him.
- 4.18 Do females enjoy sexual freedoms?
 There are repercussions for a woman’s infidelity. However, these repercussions fall upon her lover, not herself. Female infidelity is frowned upon and the accused may be asked to pay a sum of money to the woman’s husband. If female infidelity is reoccurring, the husband has the right to dissolve the marriage and send the wife back to her family. He also has the right to ask for his bride wealth back from her family. It is especially frowned upon for a chief’s wife to be unfaithful. She may be sent back to her family. (2)
- 4.19 Evidence of giving gifts to extramarital partners or extramarital offspring
 No evidence
- 4.20 If mother dies, whose raises children?
 If a mother is sick or has died, children are suckled and cared for by another woman in the household (grandmother or another wife) (2)
- 4.21 Adult sex ratio: number of adult males divided by number of (reproductive) females
 .91 males/1female (3)

4.22 Evidence for couvades

No evidence

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

4.24 Kin avoidance and respect?

Elderly men and women are regarded with the highest respect and act as advisors/consultants in family matters and religious matters (2)

A man is not allowed to shake his mother-in-law's hand or any hand of a woman relative on his wife's side of the family. This is because he has had sex with his wife and would commit a sexual crime by shaking the hand of her relatives (2)

Incestuous relationships are often avoided (2)

4.24 Joking relationships?

"A person may speak and joke with his hosts wife or mother in law only if she has been presented to him" (2)

4.25 Patterns of descent (e.g., bilateral, matrilineal) for certain rights, names or associations

Generally a patrilineal society but can have female chiefs (2)

4.26 Incest avoidance rules

The Humui is a social order that controls and regulates social and sexual conduct in general. By the laws of the Humui, there are clear restrictions on who a man cannot have intercourse with. A man is prohibited from having sexual relations with the following categories: (2)

- a. His own mother or grandmother
- b. His own daughter or granddaughter
- c. His own sister or half sister
- d. The sisters of both his father and his mother
- e. The daughter of his brother or sister and the daughters of his brother's and sister's children
- f. His wife's sister or any of her immediate relatives while she is still alive
- g. The descendants of his wife's brother
- h. The daughter of his wife's father's brother
- i. The sister, or any close relative, of any woman with whom he has had relations with, as long as that woman is alive
- j. Any woman with which his brother or half-brother has had relations with
- k. Any woman who has suckled him

However, there are a few exceptions to these rules. Chiefs sometimes contract paternal first cousin marriages. This is meant to keep to keep the wealth "in the family". (2)

Please note that there are no avoidance rules with first cousins on the mothers side (2)

4.27 Is there a formal marriage ceremony?

There are three different procedures regarding three different types of ceremonies

The first ceremony is lengthy and begins when the woman is promised at birth. The man will bring her gifts and provide for her until she is of age. When she is of age to marry and start a family, the future husband pays a small bride wealth. The bride wealth must be exchanged in the presence of a renowned member of the town. The future husband then presents the girl's mother with a cloth, and her father with a gown. He then goes home and two days later, he sends either his first wife or his sister to the girl's house with a present. After this present is given, the wife or sister asks the girl's parents if the girl can stay at the husband's home. When the parents accept and send their daughter to her husband, the mother spits in her daughter's hand and rubs the saliva on her forehead. This is to ensure many children will be born out of the union. The husband then promises the parents that he will take care of their daughter for the rest of her life, and the marriage is complete. (2)

The second ceremony takes place when a girl is asked to marry after she finished Sande. Her suitor gives the girl a nominal amount of money and he asks her to consent to have sex with him. The girl is expected to refuse and report the advances to her parents. If her parents accept his advances, then the parents receive money. This guarantees the betrothal. This marriage is common among the wealthy class. (2)

The third type of ceremony is prevalent among the common class of Mende. There is not a sum of money that is exchanged. Marriage of this kind begins with cohabitation. The man and woman speak privately about this cohabitation and the woman's parents are not notified. However, if her parents begin to notice, then the husband starts presenting them with gifts. If the man takes the marriage any further he is expected to "show life" and present the parents with a formal gift. This makes the marriage complete. (2)

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

Girls and boys are named according to whether they are the first born child or a subsequent surviving child (2)

Boys are named four days after birth and girls are named 3 days after birth (2)

Children born after the first-born will be named after various ancestors or important members of the descent group of either parent (2)

Boys who are given ancestral names are often addressed by the term "grandfather" to avoid disrespecting the dead (2)

Names are changed during coming of age rituals. A child must keep the same name throughout the initiation, but then he/she will take a fresh name, either of their own choice or to commemorate the circumstances of her career within the community. If boys and girls attend a mission school they may sometimes take a Christian name. (2)

4.29 Is marriage usually (or preferred to be) within community or outside community? (m/f difference?)

In the old days, marriage between a Mende and a non Mende person was extremely rare. However, it has become more common among people who are not Chiefs. Among the ruling class, marriage is preferred to be within the community (2)

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

In old days, marriage was regarded as a contract between the relatives of the bride and groom. The man and the woman themselves had little choice in the matter. However, now much more attention is paid to the wishes of the bride and groom. Formerly, the consent of the woman was not necessary for marriage. Now, a marriage is not valid unless the woman agrees. The mother and father of both parties must also agree to the marriage (2)

4.31 Evidence for conflict of interest over who marries who:

Once physiological and social maturity is reached, there are no real restrictions on marriage (besides the incest rules). For example, an older man may marry a younger woman as long as she has completed the Sande rituals. (2)

Slight conflicts arise involving the ruling class. There are specific objections to members of the Timne (an enemy of the Mende) marrying a Mende man or woman. There are also objections if anyone in the Mende community marries someone from the Kono or Kissi (2)

Warfare/homicide

4.14 Percent adult (male) deaths due to warfare:

Does not specifically state what percentage perished due to warfare. However, it is implied that the death tolls and the tolls of captured individuals is very high from the following excerpt from source 2:

“The captives were led out and stabbed as they passed through the fences. Their bodies were covered with leaves and left in the bush. For members of the victor’s side who had been killed, the usual funeral ceremonies were performed at a fork in the road. The captured women and children and the plunder were brought to the head warrior for division. Out of every four captives, two went as slaves to the chief, one to the head warrior, and one to the man who had made the capture”

The plurality of the captives, victors, and those deceased implies that war was fought on a large scale with a large death toll.

4.15 Outgroup vs ingroup cause of violent death:

Rival chiefdoms from neighboring communities of different cultures were the highest cause of outgroup violence. Chiefdoms would go on raids and attempt to capture people and make the town uninhabitable. The reason for these conflicts is not specified but it is implied that the cause is territory and prestige related. (2)

4.16 Reported causes of in-group and out-group killing:

Personal prestige, affluence and safety depended almost entirely on success in war- this made war very prevalent in Mende society. (2)

The Mende also took slaves from the towns that they captured. These slaves were usually exchanged for salt from the coast (2)

4.17 Number, diversity and relationship with neighboring societies (external relations):

Most relations are negative. Sometimes (but very rarely) chiefs would give their daughters in marriage to make peace with warring communities (2)

4.18 Cannibalism?

5. Socio-Political organization and interaction

5.1 Mean local residential (village) group size:

Generally the Mende live in villages comprised of 70-250 residents. These villages are primarily 1.5-5 kilometers apart. (1)

5.2 Mobility pattern: (seasonality):

Low mobility. Men attend fields 10 months out of the year (during the wet season) and women mostly stay at home. Resting time occurs around new years. (1)

5.3 Political system: (chiefs, clans etc, wealth or status classes):

The Mende live in small towns/units which are divided into chiefdoms. These chiefdoms are the political systems of Mende society. (2)

5.4 Post marital residence:

The woman will live with her husband’s family and help them cultivate their family farm. She will also help her husband cultivate his farm. She will sleep in the woman’s house where she is directed by the family head of household. This will continue until her husband increases in social status and acquires more wives. (2)

5.5 Territoriality? (defined boundaries, active defense):

Towns are encircled with fencing – usually three fences secure the outside of the town. There is also a further outer fence that is not regularly guarded, but merely consists of piles of material meant to slow down the enemy. There are then two more fences that are regularly guarded. There is a shed at each fence where people can pass through to access the town. (2)

5.6 Social interaction divisions ? (age and sex):

“The senior male has moral authority—the right to respect and obedience—over the family as a whole, especially with regard to the negotiation of debts, damages, and bride-wealth” (1)

5.7 Special friendships/joking relationships:

“Friendships” form between two individuals who are having sex together and cohabiting but are not married. This is common among the lower class of individuals. (2)

5.8 Village and house organization:

“At least one man and perhaps several of his brothers, with all of their wives and children, represent the household unit. One or more brothers and married sisters usually leave sooner or later and are incorporated into other residential units” (1)

5.9 Specialized village structures (men’s houses):

The village itself was constructed around a shelter that was built to preserve an elephant kill. Once an elephant was killed, it could not be moved, so the huntsman and his people settled around the elephant. The reputation of the elephant kill would attract outsiders and soon a village comprised of many huts would blossom around the kill (2)

5.10 Sleep in hammocks or on ground or elsewhere?

Sleep in houses (2)

5.11 Social organization, clans, moieties, lineages, etc:

Traditionally, the Chief and his family controlled the community. The Chief decided whether or not to go to war, and he also mediated disputes within the community on occasion. There is also a slight class division between men who are more successful and have more wives, and men that do not have as many wives. (2)

5.12 Trade:

Coffee, Cocoa, and Ginger are grown as cash crops (1)

There are some Mende traders of wealth and importance but mostly mostly women carry on the majority of business indigenously and in a small scale. (2)

Ares called "new towns" (which are situated next to railroads) are the centers for shopping and trading. Europeans, Syrians and Creoles, who buy native products such as palm kernels, groundnut ,and ginger, mainly operate the new towns. (2)

5.13 Indications of social hierarchies?

The Chief and his family are the highest status residents in the community. The next group of high status individuals is men who have large farms and many wives. The lower class consists of common laborers that partake in running small farming operations or small trading operations with only 1 or 2 wives. Wealth is often represented by how many wives a man has (2)

6. Ritual/Ceremony/Religion (RCR)

6.0 Time allocation to RCR:

On a regular day (with no initiations or rituals) the food sacrifice takes roughly 15 minutes (2)

6.1 Specialization (shamans and medicine):

Medicine men get their powers from the Supreme God who has left behind some of his power within the people. The word Hale is used to express this. Hale generally means any physical object or instrument meant to secure an end via supernatural means. There are many individuals that practice/specialize in hale such as: graduates an senior members from Poro and Sande initiations, medicine men, soothsayers, diviners, etc. However, there is also witches and bad magic that is considered evil. Dreams are often used to diagnose spiritual problems. They also have a higher status in the community. This is mostly because people who specialize in hale are used in many religious ceremonies. (2)

Many medicines are concocted to cure people of witchcraft and cure them of illness. People believe that sickness is a result of spiritual anger. If a spirit is mad at you, you will become sick (2)

6.2 Stimulants:

None

6.3 Passage rituals (birth, death, puberty, seasonal):

When a girl child is born, the woman whose name the girl child is about to bear takes her out in the early morning, faces the sun, spits on the child's face and says "Resemble me in all my ways and deeds because you are named after me" (2)

A girl's period of training begins around 6. She begins to imitate her mother and may undergo a mock initiation into the Sande women and participate in their dancing rituals. She may also be sent away to relatives or people of high status. In general, children do not stay at the home very long because their parents feel that they may become spoiled (2)

Women Initiation in the Sande happens around 14 or 15 (2)

Boys are circumcised around age 10- after the circumcision they begin to take on responsibilities of a man. (2) Poro initiation for boys occurs around the same age as girls (at ages 14 or 15) and is possibly one of the most important events in a normal Mende life. (2)

PORO RITUAL:

A poro session lasts from November until May. The session begins with a sacrifice in the bush; this is meant to obtain the favor of the poro spirits. Then, a present is taken to the chief requesting his approval for the upcoming session. The initiates then live in the bush nearby the permanent camp and sacred grounds. The parents of the initiates will cook large meals for the initiates in anticipation of the eve of the session. On the eve of the session the initiates and senior members will dance in the meetinghouse until they hear the spirits leaving the bush. The initiates follow the ghost to another house where they are initiated and ask a series of simple questions such as "can you carry water in a basket" to which the answer is always yes. Every boy must be circumcised before he completed entering the initiation. The initiation rites and the whole time spent in the bush symbolizes a change in status and a rebirth of the young men.(2)

SANDE RITUAL

Much like the poro school of initiation except that it is less formal. They are expected to attend to senior members of the village and help with womanly chores. They often smear their bodies with clay and wear it on their faces as a form of beauty treatment. They undergo a period of seclusion that lasts up to 3 months. The girls are not allowed to travel in public without an escort during this time. The initiation is celebrated with loud and joyful singing and afterwards the girl is sent home with a piece of tobacco recognizing that she has entered adulthood. She will then continue her education as a Sande woman (2)

6.4 Other rituals:

A man or woman must undergo a purification ritual after his/her husband has passed on so that he/she can begin having sexual relations with other people in the community. Men and women must also undergo this ritual if rape or "woman damage" has occurred (2)

Cotton trees are significant places for birth and death rituals (2)

6.5 Myths (Creation):

There is a supreme God that derived all life and activity in the material and non-material world. This God is responsible for plants, animals, and also spirits. He manifests himself in great power/influence that is demonstrated in human beings and in the natural world (with events such as lightning). The Supreme God is also married to the Earth and provides for her (2)

6.6 Cultural material (art, music, games):

Cultural material consists mainly of jewelry and carvings. The masks that women wear in ceremonial setting are also an expression of art (5)

6.7 Sex differences in RCR:

Anyone can practice religion (2)

6.8 Missionary effect:

A very small percentage of the Mende population is Christian. However, Islam is fairly influential in modern Mende culture. (2)

6.9 RCR revival:

Mende still practice their religion, however it is just infused with traits of Islam; no RCR revival because the Religion was never oppressed (2)

6.10 Death and afterlife beliefs:

It is believed that when a person dies, their spirit roams the area that they inhabited during their lifetime. There are rituals (such as pulling the dirt backwards over a grave after death) that are supposed to appease the spirits and keep them from harming the living. Also, food is a common offering to the spirits. (2)

Death for an unreasonable cause is blamed on magic (2)

6.11 Taboo of naming dead people?

No taboo, generally children are named after their ancestors; especially if they bear the ancestor's lineage or physical appearance (2)

6.12 Is there teknonymy?

No

6.13 Briefly describe religion (animism, ancestor worship, deism, magic, totems etc.)

Mende religion is a mix of spiritual worship and a belief in a higher power. Modern influence has also added a small amount of Islam. It is believed that there are four types of spirits that exist: Ancestral spirits, Genii spirits, Secret Society spirits and miscellaneous spirits (sometimes evil). The Mende also believe that their world was formerly inhabited by fairy like spirits. The remnants of this spirit are found in anthills. (2)

It is thought that when a person is sick, that person has offended the spirits and an offering must be made to appease the spirit. The Mende often sacrifice food for the spirits. However, the sacrifice can become more serious if it is linked to a Genii spirit. A Genii spirit is connected to nature and expresses human tastes, emotions and feelings. It is believed that if a Genii spirit approaches a person, the Genii either takes hold of the person, or the person takes hold of the Genii. In order to take hold of the Genii, the person must sacrifice something that is very important to him/her such as a first-born son.

7. Adornment

7.1 Body paint:

Women use a white clay to adorn themselves and mark their territory. White is the color of the Sande because it is considered a pure, positive color (5)

7.2 Piercings: none

7.3 Haircut:

A woman's hair is a sign of femininity; both thickness and strength are signs of a woman's personal strength. Hair must be oiled, clean, and tied back. Disheveled hair is a sign of mental instability. (5)

7.4 Scarification:

Women experience female circumcision and men experience circumcision as part of their initiation after the Sande and Mende (2)

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

Neck rolls are considered beautiful on a woman. They are beautiful because the rolls indicate high status and beauty (5)

7.6 Ceremonial/Ritual adornment:

Mende wear masks during ceremonies. A bird on top of the mask signifies intuition. Downcast eyes of the mask signify spiritual nature. The small mouth of the mask signifies humble character of women. The high forehead signifies good luck.

7.7 Sex differences in adornment:

Masks are only worn by women (5)

7.8 Missionary effect:

Traditional culture is often hard to discern within the Mende people because they are a relatively new society that has been heavily influenced by Islam, missionaries and colonial powers (1)

7.9 Cultural revival in adornment:

There is more use of clothing now due to the Islamic influence, but other than that the culture remains the same (5)

8. Kinship systems

8.1 Sibling classification system:

8.2 Sororate, levirate:

This is considered incestuous in Mende culture (2)

8.3 Other notable kinship typology, especially cross-cousin (MBD/FZD) typology (Crow/Hawaiian/Omaha etc.):

It is incestuous to be sexually involved with cousins on the paternal lineage, but not on the maternal side of the family. Also, it is acceptable to marry a cousin if the parties belong to a high status family (2)

9. Other interesting cultural features (list them):

Numbered references

1. everyculture.com
2. The Mende of the Sierra Leone: A West African People In Transition by Little
3. CIA World Factbook
4. ethnologue.com
5. Newberger Museum of Art Website