

1. Description

1.1 Name(s) of society, language, and language family: Sisaala (Sissala, BUSILLU SISALA, SISAI, ISSALA, HISSALA), Niger-Congo

1.2 ISO code (3 letter code from ethnologue.com): SSL, ISO 639-2: [nic](#)

1.3 Location (latitude/longitude): 10°56'N 1°56'W [5]

1.4 Brief history: The Sisaala language is spoken throughout northern Ghana. The villages are made up of mainly Sisaala speaking people, but there is a variety of other languages, including English, that is taught in schools. The main focus of Sisaala culture is production of crops and agriculture. Their lives depend on how many laborers they have in the field. This demand for labor affects marriage patterns, sexual relations, friendships, and social status. Sisaala culture is widely spread because men are expected to marry outside of their village. This mixes in cultures, languages, and traditions throughout northern Ghana.

1.5 Influence of missionaries/schools/governments/powerful neighbors: Surrounding villages of the Sisaala speakers have an effect on the Sisaala. These other villages influence some words and means of communication. "There are few, if any, monolingual Western Sisaala speakers. Interaction is common among Western Sisaala, Dagaare, and Wala speakers; therefore, many Western Sisaala speakers are multilingual in Dagaare and Wala. In Western Sisaala, loanwords are predominantly from English, Hausa, and Twi. Most loanwords are words for mechanical or technological items or for fruits and other edibles that are now brought to the Upper West Region from other areas." [3] With the mixture of these other languages and small words being thrown into Sisaala culture, there is also an effect on dialect. The dialect of Sisaala depends on the location and which languages surround them. "The majority of Western Sisaala speakers live in Lambussie. . Other villages that also have Sisaala speakers, though they are not the language majority, include Gullu [gullu], Samor [samor], Sukki [sukki], Sinna [sinna], Dende [dɛ ndæ], Chung [tʰ unɡ], Nawie [nawie], Bulli [bulli], Fiellamore [fiɛ llamore], Jawie [ɖ awie], Puzani [puzæni], Wiiru [wiiru], Bo [bo], Hamale [hamale], Boo [buu], Naballa [naballa], Dahillie [dahɪ lli], Pina [pina], Kongwalla [koŋwalla], and Hapa [haapa]. Most of these villages have Dagaate people as well as settlers from other ethnic groups. There are other groups inhabiting areas where Western Sisaala is the majority language, including the Dagaate, Wala, Fulanis, and Mosi. The Fulanis and Mosi (also known as Moshi) are nomadic peoples who are mainly shepherds of livestock. There is a dialect continuum that spreads from Lambussie, partially to the north but mainly to the east. Each village has its own dialect, though dialects spoken in surrounding villages are still mutually intelligible." [3] Not only are these languages picked up through conversation, they are taught in schools. In fact, English is a primary language in Ghana and most people are able to speak English. "Those who live and grow up in Lambussie learn to speak Western Sisaala as a first language and later learn English and Dagaare in school. English is the official language of Ghana and is taught in schools and is spoken at least functionally by most individuals. In schools in Lambussie and surrounding villages where Sisaalas live, Dagaare is also taught. This is because Dagaare is one of nine government-sponsored languages, and it is densely spoken in this area. Sisaala children learn Dagaare in school because it is one of the official literacy languages of Ghana and a test subject in this area." [3]

1.6 Ecology (natural environment): "Most Sisaala live in the flat grasslands of the Tumu district in northwestern Ghana. However, about 20% of the Sisaala have migrated to the south. Ghana is located on the coast of West Africa, just five degrees north of the equator. However, the Sisaala are more than ten degrees north and are in the 10-40 window." [1] "Northern Ghana's weather is hot and tropical. The Harmattan, a wind that blows from the Sahara desert, turns the sky to a haze of dust from December to February. The two seasons are humid and rainy (March-September) and dry (October-February)." [1] "The Lambussie area is typically a dry, arid land with equatorial dry and wet seasons. The wet season lasts from July until November, and is the fertile time for many crops including rice, groundnuts (peanuts), and other fruits and vegetables. The dry season makes up the rest of the year, with highest temperatures in April, May and June." [3]

1.7 Population size, mean village size, home range size, density: 125,000 speakers [2]

2. Economy

2.1 Main carbohydrate staple(s): "Food is the international language of friendship. In Sisaala cuisine, several people share a bowl of food. *Kore*, the staple food, is thick cornmeal mush eaten with soup made of green leaves and dried ground fish. A favourite Sisaala meal is pounded yam, or *Kapalla*, which is rather like heavy mashed potato. It is offensive to eat with your left hand. Using your right hand only, you take a piece of *kapalla* and dip it in the soup. Soups are made by boiling peanuts or a variety of green leaves. Rice and beans are considered a special treat because the meal is expensive." [1] "Many Sisaala are subsistence farmers, growing crops like maize, peanuts, yams, cotton, and cassava. Others raise food for cash, especially peanuts, yam, and cotton." [1]

2.2 Main protein-lipid sources:

2.3 Weapons: Bow and arrow, blowguns?:

2.4 Food storage:

2.5 Sexual division of production: There is no sexual division in the production of crops in the Sisaala group. "Since the Sisaala's way of life is rooted in the fact that families work together to produce their own food, children spend a lot of time working alongside their parents to collect firewood, haul water, fire pottery and tend livestock and crops. A Sisaala proverb captures this reality: "When the harvest is on, the whole family is in the field." [1]

2.6 Land tenure:

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):

4.4 Inter-birth-interval (f):

4.5 Age first marriage (m and f): Women seem to have an easier time getting married than men do in Sisaala society. "If finding sex is easy, finding a wife is much more difficult. In this polygynous society, most men are not able to secure their first wife until they are in their late twenties or early thirties. This is partly due to the fact that young girls are betrothed at an early age and may be married off to a man in spite of the fact that they love another. It is also partly due to the fact that fathers hold on to their sons' labor as long as possible." [pg 115, source 4]

4.6 Proportion of marriages ending in divorce:

4.7 Percent marriages polygynous, percent males married polygynously: There is evidence that the Sisaala culture marriages are polygynous. "Also, in this society of rainfed horticulturists, labor is scarce and children are valued. Thus, girls are married polygynously at a very early age. In a traditional setting, there would have been few, if any, spare girls to enter into prostitution." [pg 109, source 4] Not only are polygynous marriages accepted, but female competition can also be seen in this culture. "Sex between teenage boys and older in-married women is another outlet for sexual desire. Because of the practice of polygyny, there are sexually active and attractive women (even married to one's grandfather) who may not have enough coitus in marriage to suit their tastes. An elderly man, if he has the wealth to support this action, may marry a teenage girl. New wives sometimes displace older wives as active sexual partners." [pg 114, source 4] "Sisala society is strongly patriarchal. Polygyny is the ideal marriage form. As you would expect, there is a double standard with regard to the morality of sex. It is alright for either gender to engage in premarital play-sex; but upon marriage, the woman should terminate such childish play and concentrate on producing children. She should not have lovers outside of marriage, while the husband may. Thus, the male may have both play-sex and sex with his wife or wives to produce offspring." [pg 121, source 4]

4.8 Bride purchase (price), bride service, dowry?: "A wedding is a process that takes years. It traditionally starts with the suitor's first visit to a young woman's home to indicate his interest to her parents. Gifts to the prospective bride's family set off the marriage process until the groom pays a dowry of livestock and presents to his in-laws. A Sisaala dowry tends to be paid several years after the marriage when the couple has children. This is deliberate because the man wants to be sure the woman will give him children and that the marriage will last before they pay all." [1]

4.9 Inheritance patterns: Most Sisaala communities participate in farming. A main staple of their nutrition and lifestyle revolves around the farms that are available. The Sisaala have a pretty traditional way of inheriting their farm land. "Historically, Sisaalas were farmers, and they inherited their lands from their ancestors. Today approximately 80% of Sisaalas in Lambussie and surrounding areas are farmers by profession, and they are considered to be the largest group of farmers by other ethnic groups in this area." [3]

4.10 Parent-offspring interactions and conflict: "The Sisaala child is born into a large extended family, and is viewed as belonging to everyone, not just to the parents. The child is seen as a gift from the ancestors. A sense of individualism does not exist in Sisaala culture. Community and family are paramount." [1]

4.11 Homosexual activities, social attitudes towards homosexuals: "Before the advent of prostitution in towns, young men had several avenues open to them.... They could engage in homosexual gratification. This may occur, but I know of no cases and there are no overtly homosexual relations or couples in Sisalaland; nor is there any customary demarcation of the effeminate male or masculine woman. Transvestitism is not a tradition." [pg 114, source 4]

4.12 Pattern of exogamy (endogamy): "The settlement pattern affects the availability of sexual partners. Finding easily accessible lovers is more difficult for men in Eastern Sisalaland than in the West because in the East an exogamous clan is comprised of many villages which are separated by long distances. In the West, a village may be comprised of several clans, meaning that a man has several marriageable girls living in his village. In Eastern Sisalaland, a boy meets girls at distant funerals, markets or when eligible girls come to visit their married sisters in his village." [pg 115, source 4]

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: Though there is no specific evidence of rape, some Sisaala women take part in prostitution. Prostitution usually takes place in a town called Tumu. There is a small bar with rooms in the back for men to take part in sexual relations with women. "Prostitutes are visited by strangers living in the area, by young men and by the occasional older man who is without a wife or girlfriend. In the main town of Tumu there were no houses of ill repute, as such but there was a well-known beer-bar called the Moonlight Bar. It was the hangout for young men with a little extra change in their pockets. The bar provided little rooms where a man could have a tryst with a girl." [pg 108, source 4] "The reason that prostitution is not an indigenous tradition in Sisala culture is that, presumably, men go to prostitutes to have coitus because they cannot find that experience elsewhere. However, sexual gratification is much easier to obtain than money or goods to make a payment for sex." [pg 109, source 4] Though prostitution happens, Sisaala females are not looking to ruin their lives over a little fun at a bar. "However, these are not professional prostitutes, in the sense that they intend to make this their lifelong occupation. Prostitution is a rather haphazard and transitory endeavor for most prostitutes. Marriage is the eventual goal of these girls, as it is for most Sisala girls." [pg 109, source 4]

4.17 Preferential category for spouse (e.g., cross cousin)

4.18 Do females enjoy sexual freedoms?

4.19 Evidence of giving gifts to extramarital partners or extramarital offspring:

4.20 If mother dies, whose raises children? In Sisaala culture, the mother of a child simply helps to raise her own child. Technically, her father owns the is owner of any child she bares. "If the girl becomes pregnant, it is not a sin since there is no moral overtone to premarital sex. There is no shame. It is not even a bad action because her father, the owner of her reproductive rights, will accept and raise the child as one of his own. After all, his greatest economic need is labor- boys to work the farm and girls to help out domestically." [pg 117, source 4]

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

4.22 Evidence for couvades: no evidence either way

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

4.24 Kin avoidance and respect?

4.24 Joking relationships?

4.25 Patterns of descent (e.g., bilateral, matrilineal) for certain rights, names or associations: "The worst fate for a man or a woman is to die without a son. Sisaala informants expressed this in terms of the ancestor cult, characteristically using rhetorical questions: "who will call our names when we are dead?" or "Who will remember us?" [pg 121, source 4]

4.26 Incest avoidance rules

4.27 Is there a formal marriage ceremony?

4.28 In what way(s) does one get a name, change their name, and obtain another name? In Sisaala culture, the naming ceremony of a child is quite large. Those who know the parents and are a part of the community life of the village make an appearance to watch the baby receive its name. "As well as weddings and funerals, baby naming ceremonies are a major occasion for the Sisaala." [1]

4.29 Is marriage usually (or preferred to be) within community or outside community? (m/f difference?): Marriage is preferred to be with someone that is not in the same village. It is actually taboo for marriage to be within the same village in this culture. "It is taboo for people of the same village or "clan village" to wed." [1] "Neighbors, friends, and village or section elders, who need to be consulted before a marriage takes place, often witness the process that culminates in the young woman's move to her suitor's village." [1]

4.30 Are marriages arranged? Who arranges (e.g., parents, close kin)? Marriages in Sisaalaland are almost always arranged.

"Promising a daughter in marriage can happen in one of two ways: (1) A man can approach a pregnant woman, give her ten white cowrie shells, or, these days, ten pesewas and tell her, "If your baby is a boy, let him be my friend; but if your baby is born a girl, let her be my wife." If the woman and her husband accept the prestation, it is considered to be the first in a series of payments to be made over the years. ... (2) A girl might live with her father, but the initial prestations have already begun to be paid by a groom-to-be. Once the first payment is made, along with three days of brideservice on the father's farm, the girl is betrothed." [pg 116, source 4]

4.31 Evidence for conflict of interest over who marries who: "Obviously, a girl can prefer one man over another. Her father's idea of a good match probably has a sound economic base, such as when the groom comes from a lineage with many young men who can be called on for farm labor. She may be attracted to another man and may even run away with him. Sometimes a father forces his daughter to go live with a man she does not love, only to have her run away with her lover. Sometimes she stays in an arranged marriage, but keeps her "true" lover on the side. Such stories keep the gossips busy in a land without soap opera or romance novels." [pg 116, source 4]

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:

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

4.18 Cannibalism?

5. Socio-Political organization and interaction

5.1 Mean local residential (village) group size:

5.2 Mobility pattern: (seasonality):

5.3 Political system: (chiefs, clans etc, wealth or status classes): "Traditionally, political authority does not extend beyond the village, but resides in the hands of the village owner, the *jangtina*. As custodian of the village shrine, the *jangtina* was responsible to settle intra-village disputes through certain rituals. Today, this "village owner" position still exists but provides leadership in conjunction with the local village chief and the district paramount chief." [1] "When one goes to greet the chief it has become customary to approach him with certain signs of respect. One should remove one's sandals and approach him in a slightly crouched posture, squatting directly before him. Women and young men often keep their eyes averted from him. He is only called "chief," never by his name." [pg 64 source 4]

5.4 Post marital residence:

5.5 Territoriality? (defined boundaries, active defense):

5.6 Social interaction divisions ? (age and sex): "The sexual division of labor was still intact. Only men farmed, while women gathered bush products, and did domestic chores and grew soup ingredients in kitchen gardens. Men hunted in the dry season; women gathered fish from standing pools left as the streams dried up. Sisaala women had few institutional roles in mainstream farming, their main tasks being domestic and reproductive. They did help with planting and harvesting. What income they generated was from gathered bush products, beer-brewing, charcoal and firewood sales, or craft-production such as pottery or baskets." [pg 77 source 4]

5.7 Special friendships/joking relationships: Everyone in the Sisaala village seems to have respect and friendships with most other members of the village. Here is an example of a daily way to greet someone in the village. "There's no such thing as a "standard" Sisaala greeting. They have a phrase to fit every occasion. *Bedia* (pronounced BAY-dee-ha) is the morning greeting you would give

someone you meet on a walk. *Ediapina* (I-dayh-pi-NAHO) is the reply. There's always a conversation starter suited to your setting. Swapping greetings of any kind almost always involves a chat about family (including extended family) and work. Quickly passing by with a wave or a nod is rude to the Sisaala." [1] As you can see, they lead a lifestyle very closely related to personal relationships.

5.8 Village and house organization: "Much of the Tumu district is electrified, allowing TV and radio broadcasts. Roads are in poor condition, but as with much of Ghana, progress is being made to tarmac the major link roads. The Tumu district has a police station, post office, and banking facilities." [1]

5.9 Specialized village structures (mens' houses): "Traditional Sisaala homes are mud block lined rooms built around a central courtyard to form a family compound, but today many Sisaala plaster their homes with cement and roof with metal roofing sheets." [1]

5.10 Sleep in hammocks or on ground or elsewhere?

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

5.12 Trade:

5.13 Indications of social hierarchies?

6. Ritual/Ceremony/Religion (RCR)

6.0 Time allocation to RCR:

6.1 Specialization (shamans and medicine): Even though there is modern medicine available to the people of the Sisaala village, there is still the belief that traditional medicine and rituals should be tried first. "There is one national doctor in Tumu, who is supported by several overseas medics from various NGOs. Several outlying health posts provide health-care for those not requiring admission to the hospital. For most Sisaala, the hospital is till the medicine of the white man and is only sought after traditional medicine has failed to offer relief." [1]

6.2 Stimulants:

6.3 Passage rituals (birth, death, puberty, seasonal): In Sisaala culture, it is tradition to hold two funerals. The first funeral is at the time of burial, and the second happens after a short amount of time in order to celebrate the life of that person. The second funeral is normally a large ceremony, especially if the deceased is an elder. "Funerals are elaborate, and until the influence of Islam, everyone had two. Today, two funerals are held mainly for the elderly. The first funeral happens at the time of burial. Another larger one follows, sometimes immediately, but often weeks or months later during the dry season. The "second funeral" lasts three days, and people from many communities attend, especially if it is for an old person, as anyone remotely related will come. This funeral involves a procession around the village in which war songs are sung, shotguns are fired, and traditional weapons (spears, bow and arrows) are waved in the air amid drumming and dancing." [1] The Sisaala also take the passage into adulthood very seriously. This is one of the biggest transitions in their lives. "Thus, transition from childhood to adulthood is one of moving away from playful sexuality to responsible sexuality focused on the procreation of children and the reproduction of society." [pg 119, source 4] "The main rite marking this transition to adulthood involves a series of rituals revolving around marriage, childbirth and the transformation of the physical body of the child into a social being. ... The birth of the first child is crucial as a marker of the transition to adulthood. Once a couple has produced a socially defined human being they are considered to be adults." [pg 120/121, source 4]

6.4 Other rituals: "Indeed, at a person's funeral it is customary for such lovers to approach the funeral bench to offer their last respects to their departed. The living lover raises the gift into the air and says something like: "my lover is gone, who will step forward to take his/her place?" ... At a time of significant loss, Sisaala ritual makes room for an illicit lover. While this lover may have been hidden, it is hard to keep secrets in Sisaalaland." [pg 119, source 4]

6.5 Myths (Creation):

6.6 Cultural material (art, music, games):

6.7 Sex differences in RCR:

6.8 Missionary effect: A church was built close to the Sisaala village called the Bible Church of Africa. This church is striving to spread the word of Jesus through Christianity, but it is a slow process due to the effect of past generations. "Many Sisaala listen to the message of Christ with interest but are reluctant to commit themselves because of their Islamic beliefs. Fear of losing the protection of their ancestors also keeps the Sisaala from responding to Christianity, but the church is slowly growing." [1]

6.9 RCR revival: Most of the modern day Sisaala are Islamic. They believe in Islamic beliefs, while still incorporating their traditional cultures and ceremonies into the religion. "There are eight major dialects spoken by the 121,000 Sisaali people. A New Testament in Isaalig, a Sisaali dialect, was printed in 1984. Work on the Old Testament is still forging ahead, with most of the historical books, the Psalms, and the major prophets at the checking stage. In 2003, the entire New Testament became available on cassette in Isaling. Due to a low literacy rate, audio recordings are a more effective means of sharing Jesus with the Sisaala. Oral storytelling and apprenticeship are traditional ways to relay information." [1]

6.10 Death and afterlife beliefs:

6.11 Taboo of naming dead people?

6.12 Is there teknonymy?

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

7. Adornment

7.1 Body paint:

7.2 Piercings:

7.3 Haircut:

7.4 Scarification:

7.5 Adornment (beads, feathers, lip plates, etc.): In Sisaala society, a head scarf can tell you much about a women's marital status. "If a man sees a girl he wishes to court, he buys her a head scarf (nyukpala). If she accepts it, they are dating. She will not wear the scarf, as only married women wear scarves. A nyukpala is doubly symbolic for the Sisala. Only married women wear nyukpalaa, and it is made of cloth which men traditionally had the obligation to supply for their wives." [pg 116, source 4]

7.6 Ceremonial/Ritual adornment:

7.7 Sex differences in adornment:

7.8 Missionary effect:

7.9 Cultural revival in adornment:

8. Kinship systems

8.1 Sibling classification system:

8.2 Sororate, levirate: "When a girl is old enough she goes to live with her betrothed. It might sound like a man would have to wait a long time for such a wife, but he may already be married, quite often to a sister, real or classificatory, of his betrothed. If this is the case, she might come to live in his house at the age of seven or eight to act as a handmaiden to her sister. Even if there is no sororal arrangement, she may come at a young age to help the man's other wife or wives with household chores." [pg 116, source 4]

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

9. Other interesting cultural features (list them):

Education: Education seems to be an important aspect, or at least is beginning to be more prominent, in Sisaala culture. "Students are tested in an array of subjects at a presecondary level which determines their possibilities for further education. This sociolinguistic situation is unfortunately not conducive to Sisaala-language learning. Because education is seen as the key to a child's future, spending valuable time learning essential testing subjects is preferred to having Western Sisaala taught in schools. The deteriorating effects of not having access to Sisaala written materials and of learning other languages in school may be apparent in Western Sisaala's numeral system. Whereas elders and adults report their ability to count up to one million, using Western Sisaala native forms, teenagers' and children's ability to count using native Western Sisaala forms is very small if existent at all. Generally, counting is done in English." [3]

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