



# RHODE ISLAND COLLEGE

## **M.Ed. In TESL Program Language Group Specific Informational Reports**

Produced by Graduate Students in the M.Ed. In TESL Program  
In the Feinstein School of Education and Human Development

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# Kpelle



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The **Kpelle language** is part of the **Mande** family of languages, which is a subset of the **Niger-Congo** languages in **Africa**. There are two types of Kpelle: Guinean and Liberian. Although they are very close, they are different enough to require separate learning materials for those learning in Kpelle.

- **Guinean Kpelle** (also known as Guerzé in French) is spoken by *approximately 400,000-500,000* people, mainly spoken in the **Guinean forest regions**

- There are **two grammars** for Guinean Kpelle: **Casthelain and Lasort**.
- There are **two dialects** for Guinean Kpelle: **Gbali** and “**standard Guinean Kpelle**” (SGK)

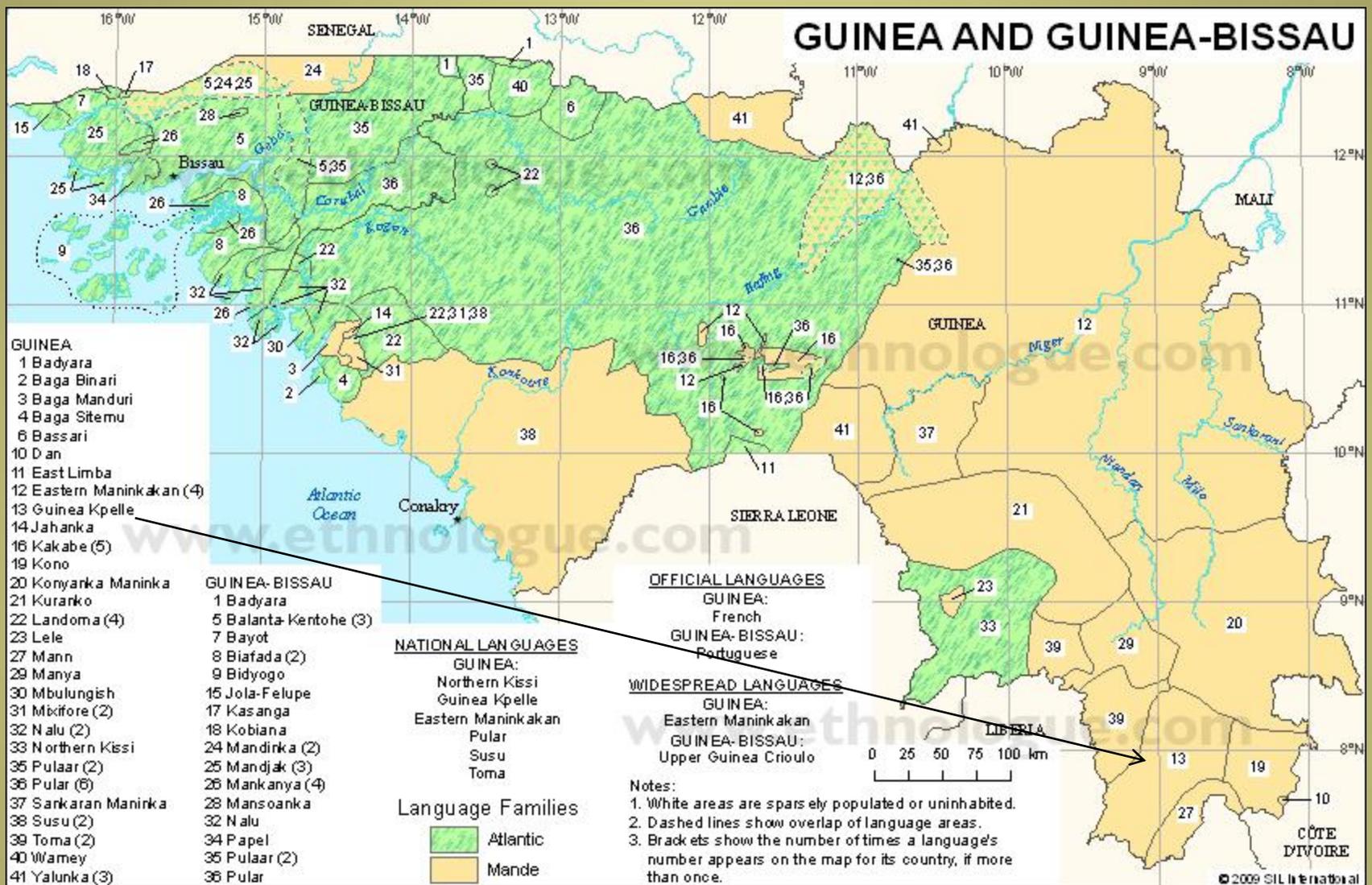
- **Liberian Kpelle** is spoken by *approximately 480,000 people* and is currently taught in Liberian schools; although English is the official language of Liberia

- **One known dialect** of Liberian Kpelle is known as “**standard Liberian Kpelle**” (SLK)

- There are **five tonal classes** in this “**Proto-South-West Mande**” language (PSWM). The National African Language Resource Center states that, “Tone is both lexically and graphically significant in Kpelle.”

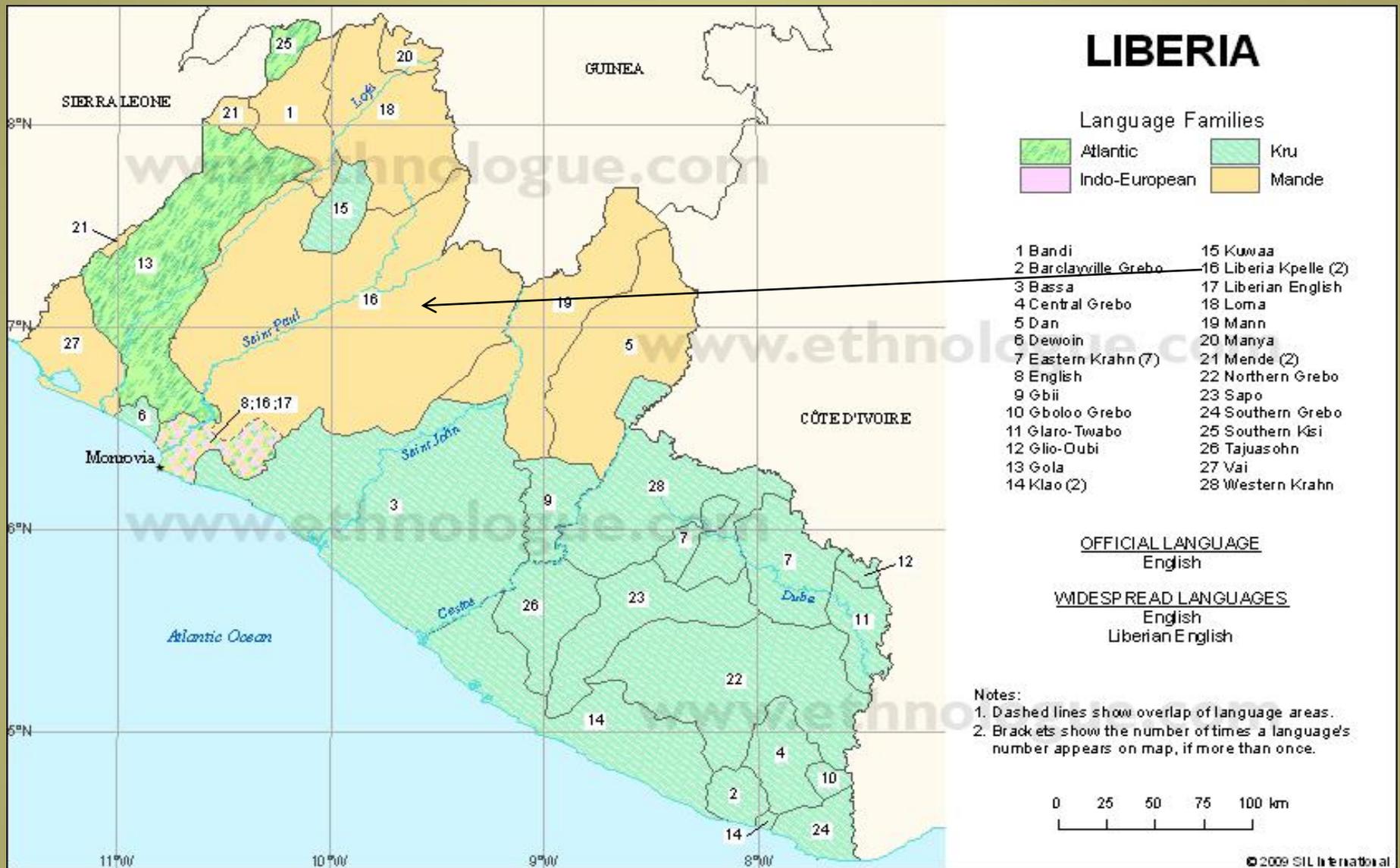
- There are **two pitch levels** in PSWM: **high and low**.

- There are **no noun classes in Kpelle**, which is no different than other Mande languages.



( <http://www.ethnologue.com/> )

Alternate names for the Guinean version of Kpelle: Akpese, Gbese, Gerse, Gerze, Guerze, Kpele, Kpelese, Kpelesetina, Kperese, Kpese, Kpwessi, Northern Kpele, Pessa, Pessy



[\(http://www.ethnologue.com/\)](http://www.ethnologue.com/)

Alternate names for the Liberian version of Kpelle: Gbese, Kpele, Kpwessi, Pessa, Pessy

# The Syllabary of Kpelle

“The **Kpellesyllabary** was invented during the **1930s** by **Chief Gbili of Sanoyea, Liberia**. It was used to some extent by speakers of Kpelle in Liberia and Guinea during the 1930s and early 1940s but never achieved popular acceptance. Today **Kpelle** is usually **written with a version of the Latin alphabet.**”

The Kpellesyllabary consists of **88 graphemes** and is written from **left to right** in **horizontal rows**.

Many of the glyphs have more than one form.

# Kpelle Alphabet

Alpha	a	(b)	ᔁ	(d)	(e)	ε	ᔃ	(f)	g	ᔅ	GB	GW	h	HW	i
Phono	a	(b)	ᔁ	(d)	(e)	ε	ᔃ	(f)	g	ᔅ	GB	GW	h	HW	i

Alpha	j	k	KP	kW	l	m	n	NW	N	H	o	ᔇ	p	r	s
Phono	dy	k	KP	kW	l	m	n	NW	N	NH	o	ᔇ	p	r	s

Alpha	t	u	v	w	z
Phono	t	u	v	w	z

(<http://sumale.vjf.cnrs.fr/>)

PSWM	Guinean Kpelle	Liberian Kpelle
1). cvÉ, cvÉcvÉ	1) cvÉ, cvÉcvÉ: wúlú 'tree'	1) cvÉ, cvÉcvÉ: wúrú 'tree'
2). cvÝ, cvØcvÝ	2) cvØcvØ': yàlà' 'lion'	2) CVÆCVÆ: yālā 'lion'
3). cvÚ, cvØcvÚ	3) cvØcvÚ: yòwô / yòwâ 'axe'	3) cvÚ, cVÆcvÚ: yūo^ 'axe'
4). cvÉcvØ or cvÉcvÚ	4) cvÉcvÚ: yílê ` dog'	4) cvÉcvØ: yílà 'dog'
5). cvØcvØ	5) cvØcvØ: gbònò 'ring'	5) cvØcvØ: gbònò 'ring'

*PSWM – Proto-South-West Mande*  
*c – consonant*  
*v - vowel*

**Yàádiháyá** 'You have exhausted them'

**Yàá jáyá** 'You have exhausted me'

**Yàájàyá** 'You have exhausted him'

*Slight differences in pronunciation can change the meaning of the sentence.*



	i	a	u	e	ɛ	ɔ	o	-
p/b	ḡ ḡ	ḡ ḡ	#	ḡ ḡ	ḡ	ḡ	ḡ ḡ	
b/m	ḡ	ḡ ḡ		ḡ X	ḡ		ḡ ḡ	
kp/gb	ḡ ḡ	ḡ ḡ	X	ḡ ḡ	ḡ ḡ	ḡ ḡ	ḡ ḡ	
f/v	ḡ ḡ	N z			ḡ	ḡ ḡ	ḡ ḡ	
t/d	ḡ ḡ ḡ (di)	ḡ ḡ	ḡ ḡ	ḡ ḡ	ḡ	ḡ ḡ ḡ	ḡ	
l/n	ḡ ḡ	ḡ	ḡ ḡ	ḡ ḡ	ḡ ḡ	ḡ ḡ	ḡ ḡ	
h(s)/j(z)	ḡ ḡ	ḡ ḡ	ḡ	ḡ ḡ	ḡ ḡ	ḡ ḡ	ḡ ḡ	
y/hy	ḡ ḡ	ḡ ḡ		ḡ ḡ	ḡ ḡ			ḡ ḡ
k/g	ḡ ḡ	ḡ ḡ ḡ ḡ (ga)	ḡ ḡ	ḡ ḡ	ḡ ḡ	ḡ	ḡ ḡ	
kw/gw	ḡ ḡ			ḡ ḡ	ḡ ḡ			
ɣ (/ŋ)	ḡ ḡ	ḡ ḡ			ḡ ḡ			
ɣ / w			ḡ ḡ			ḡ	ḡ	
w (/ŋw)	ḡ ḡ	ḡ ḡ ḡ ḡ ḡ (wan)	ḡ ḡ ḡ ḡ (wun)		ḡ ḡ ḡ ḡ	ḡ ḡ (won)		
-					ḡ ḡ			
nasal syllables	ḡ	ḡ	ḡ	ḡ	ḡ	ḡ	-	syllabic nasal
m	ḡ ḡ	ḡ ḡ	ḡ ḡ			ḡ ḡ		
n	ḡ ḡ	ḡ ḡ	ḡ ḡ	ḡ ḡ				
ny		ḡ ḡ		ḡ ḡ	ḡ ḡ	ḡ ḡ		
ŋ		ḡ ḡ						ḡ ḡ

(<http://www.omniglot.com/>)

## Sample text in Kpelle (Latin alphabet)

Nukangelekaapələkaatanən, yiliba nu kələmaawiyəpələdatəwigaapeiyeneyiih ukəpələkaalətanən; dikeməni a nukannjaabəgəehwəkəliwəlikəmaa ə lədiluwai.

## Translation

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

*(Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights)*

# Difficulties Learning English

Some issues speakers of Kpelle might face include:

- learning numerous new vocabulary words for what they only had one word for (for example: The Kpelle word for **circle** is “**kere-kere**” is “used to describe the shape of a pot, a frog, a sledge hammer, and a turtle” (Berry, J.W. & Dasen, P.R., 1974).
- lack of schooling (many Kpelle do not get more than eight years of school) making them fall behind on learning grammar, syntax, and semantics in their own language (L1), never mind in English (L2)
- learning completely new concepts on top of the vocabulary, such as measurement – the Kpelle can measure things with their hands or by using terms like “far” and “not far,” a measurement of five miles or six meters is completely foreign to them
- since Kpelle is a monosyllabic and tonal language, difficulties in getting them to say words with more than one syllable and recognize it as one word may be difficult; luckily, English uses different tones of voice to express meaning to common words so the listener can understand better, although Kpelle use tones to sometimes mean completely different words based on their pronunciation

# Difficulties Learning English

- With the exception of nouns that refer to people, **most nouns** in the Kpelle language are the **same in both singular and plural form**; the **context** in which the word was used **gives it its meaning**. In the “people” nouns, if they are dependent, the plural form is written with a “ni” at the end; if they are independent, there are other words to represent the plural.
- In the English language, **nouns** are specific in the sense that we may say that “the sun is shining,” but **in Kpelle**, they will be **non-specific** and will say “a sun is shining,” which is considered a non-specific form.
- **Adjectives** have different functions in Kpelle than in English. There are two types: **predicating** and **attributing**. “Predicating verbs, by far the largest class, are derived from verbs. In other words, if you know the verb, you can predict the adjective form” (Thach, S. & Dwyer, D., 1981, p. 64).
- **For emphasis** in a word or phrase, Kpelle speakers use the letters/sound “**Ḃé;**” they **do not change the tone of their voice for emphasis** (Thach, S. & Dwyer, D., 1981, p. 76).

# Difficulties Learning English

- According to Thach and Dwyer (1981, p. 176), “English is not perfectly phonemic which means that it is not always possible to determine how a word is going to be pronounced (given its spelling) or written (given its sound)”. For example, English uses the letter “s” in words like: see, raise, and measure, and each of the “s” sounds sound different. This creates a challenge for Kpelle speakers learning English.
- The vowels used in Kpelle (and in other Mande languages) do not sound exactly like English vowels, so the ability of Kpelle speakers to pronounce English words correctly is made slightly more difficult. For example, “e” and “i” in Kpelle have slightly different sounds. They sound like they have a “y” at the end, which extends the vowel sound. Kpelle speakers may be tempted to make their vowel sounds longer than necessary. For example, “bee” in English would be pronounced as “biy” in Kpelle. (Thach, S. & Dwyer, D., 1981, p. 179).

# Communication

- People from Liberia tend to be tranquil and composed. They will show their disagreement with silence instead of in a verbal argument.
- Handshakes are a common greeting. Men are typically the only people to shake hands. Women rarely shake hands with others. Some men only shake hands with their peers and they also “pull each other’s middle finger, and snap it between their thumb and middle finger” (CultureVision, 2011).
- When beckoning for someone, it is looked down upon to use only one finger, all fingers must be used and the palm must be up. The same goes for pointing; if one must point at someone, the whole hand must be used.
- “Direct eye contact is avoided” (CultureVision, 2011). It is also a sign of respect to bow slightly when speaking to an elder.
- Hand-holding also has rules among the Kpelle people. Two people of the same sex are allowed to hold hands, but not two people of the opposite sex. Public displays of affection are not allowed either. Also, “the left hand is considered unclean” (CultureVision, 2011). “Objects are received and passed with the right hand or both hands” (CultureVision, 2011).
- Time does not matter much for the Kpelle. Being late is not out of the ordinary.

# Resources

## Internet Sites

Ager, S. (2011). Kpelle syllabary. *Omniglot: Writing systems & languages of the world*. Retrieved from <http://www.omniglot.com/writing/kpelle.htm>

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## Images

Chanard, C. LLACAN. (2006). Retrieved from:

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## Images

Ager, S. (2011). *Kpelle syllabary* [Image], Retrieved from: <http://www.omniglot.com/writing/kpelle.htm>

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## Maps

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