

### On the Origins of Southwest Mande Ethnonyms

The present analysis deals with the historical and present names used for the identification of the ethnicities and languages of the South-Western group of the Mande family, inhabiting the rainforest and savanna zones of the Southeastern corner of Guinea, Northern and Central Liberia, and Sierra Leone. There are six major ethnic/language units in the group, each of them divided into smaller dialectal varieties. These are listed below, with alternate ethnonyms (used across the literature) given in brackets:

1. Kpelle (Guerzé, Kpese, Gbese, Pessy), including Gbali and Hege.
2. Looma (Toma, Loghoma, Lorma), including Lulama, Ninibu, Woi-Balagha, Gizima, Gbunde (Bunde, Bode), Vekema, Wubomai, Buluyema, and Ziema (Ziama, Syema).
3. Zialo (Ziolo, Shialu), including Kelighigo, Woijawa, Bayawa, Wolo-Ziyolo, and Lawolozu.
4. Bandi (Gbandi, Gbande, Bode, Bonde), including Tahamba, Wawoma, Wulukoha (Wukoha), Hasala, Lukasu, and Hembe (Yawiazu).
5. Mende, including Kpa, Ko, Wanjama, and Sewawa.
6. Loko, including Landogo and Logo (Sanda).

There is a clear lack of literature studying SW Mande ethnonyms and their origins. Hair [1968] identified the ancestors of the present-day Mende, Loko, Bandi and Looma with the legendary historical people of Hondo, said to have occupied the region of northern Liberia. Hair did not analyse deeper, but that did Dwyer in his recent article [2005]. He was the only researcher who paid close attention to the origins of SW Mande ethnonyms. However, he did not involve lesser (dialectal) ethnic names into his analysis, nor he mentioned Kpelle data. Moreover, the answer to the most intriguing question of the whole case was not found: so which was the name of the people having spoken Proto-SW Mande?

Linguistically, Dwyer seemed to be right to claim that Mende was in fact born as a *lingua franca* for the region of today's Sierra Leone. This must have happened as the result of the Mane invasions into the region in mid-sixteenth century. The invaders, probably a mixture of Manden and SW Mande ethnicities, were coming from the territory of the declining Mali empire and quickly became the new power in the area. Still the dominating language of Sierra Leone, Mende demonstrates traces of simplification of its morphology and syntax and some other peculiarities in phonology and morphosyntax, quite characteristic for koine-type languages [Dwyer 2005: 36-38]. The local population of today's Sierra Leone adopting the language of their conquerors also introduced some new features into it.

The ethnonym *Mende* is rightly linked with the common terms 'Mali' and 'Mani' (generated through some widespread vowel changes) denoting the prestige of the Mali empire [Dwyer 2005]. The original meaning of *man-da* is most probably 'lord' or 'lordship' (cf. *\*man-san* 'king' and such toponyms as Macenta, lit. *\*Manṣan-da* 'king's place'). In Limba, an aboriginal language of northern Sierra Leone, *Mende* has a meaning 'king, royalty' [Clarke 1922: 46]. Adopting such a name connecting them to the powerful empire of the past would certainly be a matter of political prestige for the Mende aristocracy.

The name of Loko, Mende's closest relatives in northern Sierra Leone, should be treated as the distorted form of *Lɔɔɔ* (self-identification of one of the two major dialectal groups of Loko), itself a lenited form of the original *\*dɔɔɔ* which is literally translated as 'ground'. The name of the other dialectal group, *La-ndɔɔɔ*, confirms the original initial consonant. The latter may be translated as 'river mouth land' (cf. Loko *nda / la* 'mouth').

Using a toponym for naming the ethnic group is no surprise. Some (or even most) of the ethnonyms listed on the first page of the present paper are in fact original toponymic identification signs. The projection of a place name to the people inhabiting it is typologically

justified and can easily be seen in the final locative postpositions on most of the names in the list above, all traced back to Proto-SW Mande:

\**ma* / \**ṽa* ‘on, upon, on the surface’;

\**bu* / \**wu* ‘under, below’;

\**su* / \**zu* ‘in, inside’;

\**da* / \**la* ‘place’.

Using toponyms for identifying the group of closely related people is especially characteristic for dialectal names: cf. *Nini-bu*, lit. ‘under the shade’ (of a mount?), *Gizi-ma* ‘on the mountain’, *Lula-ma* ‘on the rot’, *Zie-ma* ‘on the water’, and *’Bulu-ye-ma*<sup>1</sup> ‘on the salt water’ (all five are dialects of Looma). The ethnonym *Hasa-la* (naming a subgroup of the Bandi) means ‘the rocky place’. The name *Woi-nja-ma* ‘on the rotten water’ (i.e. the marsh) marks both the dialectal groups of Zialo and Mende, and a town in Liberia, populated by the Looma. Less transparent, but also comprehensible are the names of two more dialects of Looma, *Veke-ma* ‘on the branches’ (in the rainforest zone?) and *Woi-Bala-ya* ‘at the rotten field’ (mind *kpala* / *bala* ‘field’ and a frequent variation between *b* and *β* in Looma [Выдрин 1987]).

It seems quite natural that the subgroups of the same ethnicity do not receive separate ethnic names but are only distinguished by the land they occupy: “those in the mountains”, “in the marshes”, “in the forest”, etc.<sup>2</sup>

But this same could be true for the epoch when Loko and Looma themselves were only dialects of an earlier common language. The name *Looma*, originally *Лəɟə-ma* < \**dəɟə-ma* ‘on the ground’ (the intervocalic drop is a regular feature), has in fact the same roots as *Loko*, both derived from the Mande word \**dəɟə* ‘ground’. As opposed, for instance, to names like *Gizi-ma* ‘on the mountains’, the name \**Dəɟə-ma* could mean more exactly ‘on the lowland’ (especially for the neighbouring Kpelle who inhabit paramount areas of Liberia [Leidenfrost & McKay 2005: 11]).

Subsequently, we conclude that *Mende* was a politically prestigious name of the language adopted by the new Mande lords of Sierra Leone lands, while *Лəɟə* and *Лəɟə-ma* are originally toponyms. As for the original name for the ethnic group speaking the common SW Mande proto-language, only one trustworthy variant is left: it is the name still preserved by the Bandi people.

In fact, the ethnonym *Bandi* (more correctly, *Bandi*, with a regular weakening of the initial consonant in ethnonyms) is not limited by this particular ethnic group. It is still preserved across all the SW Mande area. The Limba of Sierra Leone call the neighbouring Loko *Wu-bandi*, pl. *Bi-bandi-ŋ*, [Clarke 1922: 56], and their language *Hu-bandi*. This is yet another proof that the Loko did not use this latter name in the past. Their self-identification name *Bandi* was not preserved among the speakers replaced by a toponym *Лəɟə* which was originated externally - probably, by the Mende. The neighbouring Limba have kept the original name: just like some languages of northern Europe still know Germans as “Saxons”, and Russian as “Veneds” or “Krivichs”.

Another cognate for the ethnonym *Bandi* is found on the other end of the SW Mande-speaking area: the northernmost dialectal group of Kpelle calls its language *Gbali-wòò* ‘language of Gbali’, which demonstrates the regular correspondence between the “strong” *d* in *Bandi* and its “weak” counterpart *l* in Kpelle. Konoshenko [Коношенко 2009] translates *Gbali-wòò* as ‘the language of the savanna’, however, no such word for ‘savanna’ is witnessed in any dictionaries or glossaries of Kpelle. It is obvious, moreover, that the very term *Kpelle* (self-identification *kpɛlee* or *kpɛlɛɛ*) reflects the same word as *Gbali*, with the “strengthened” initial. Alternate

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that most SW Mande toponyms and ethnonyms show the word order with attributes preceding head nouns, which is contrary to the word order in present-day languages of the group: cf. *Zialo ja pā zu* ‘in good water’, but place name *Pā-ja-zu*. The analysis inspired by this observation lies however beyond the present study.

<sup>2</sup> This was exactly the case with early medieval Slavic tribal groups, e.g. *Polyane* ‘those in fields’, *Drevlyane* ‘those in the trees’, *Dregoviči* ‘those in the marsh’.

names for the ethnicity, such as *Kpese*, *Gbese*, *Guerzé*, and *Pessy*, are all derived from *kpɛlɛe-sii* ‘the Kpelle tribe’ [Welmers 1962: 69].

Finally, the term *Bandi* is also preserved among the Looma dialects: there, it is found throughout the literature as *Gbunde*, *Bunde*, *Bode*. As it was mentioned earlier, *Bode* and *Gbande* are also alternates for the name of the Bandi people and language. It is hard to say which final vowel we should choose for the proto-language form: *-e* (as in *Kpɛlɛɛ*, *Gbunde*, *Gbande*, *Bode*) or *-i* (as in *Bandi*, *Gbandi*, *Gbali*), but it seems solid enough to reconstruct the ethnonym *\*Baŋdi* / *\*Baŋde* to denote the speakers of the Proto-SW Mande language, even though the etymology of this word is yet to be discovered.

One of the mysteries left is the name for the Zialo language and people, which is still waiting for its etymology<sup>3</sup>. However, since the language was only discovered in 2010, much is still left to be described in it.

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<sup>3</sup> But cf. Looma (Wubomai) *zii*, Kpelle *sii* ‘tribe’.