

Liberia

Response to Information Request Number:	LBR01001.ZNK
Date:	5 October 2000
Subject:	Liberia: Information on the physical markings of various ethnic groups
From:	INS Resource Information Center, Washington, D.C.
Keywords:	Liberia / ethnic minorities / ethnicity / cultural identity / cultural integration / ethnic community organizations / cultural heritage / indigenous peoples

Query:

Do any of the ethnic groups in Liberia have distinctive or unique physical markings that are only utilized by their particular group?

Response:

The Kissi group marks its members with three scars on each cheek. They also file or otherwise shape the two middle upper teeth into a triangle. Though this is a traditional cultural practice, it is decreasing due to modernization and Westernization in Liberia. Liberian journalist Kenneth Best knew of no other tribe in Liberia that marked its members in such a fashion (Best, 25 August 2000). The Kissi live in upper Lofa County at the conjunction of Liberia, Guinea, and Sierra Leone. They number approximately 441,000, 115,000 of which are in Liberia. The Kissi are predominantly rice cultivators and are one of only two ethnic groups to be directly descended from the original inhabitants of Liberia (Minority Rights Group International 1997, 428).

The Poro society, which is a secret men's society which permeates Liberian life, also marks its members. Boys who have completed initiation rites are marked by scarification on the back and often on the chest and stomach as well. These societies draw members from the Kpelle, Mende, Loma, and Mano groups (*Encyclopedia of World Cultures Volume IX* 1995, 173 & 174). Another Liberia expert includes the Gbandi, Kissi, Gio (also referred to as Dan), and Vai in the list of ethnic groups which participate in these practices (Best, 25 August 2000). Africa researcher Solomon Toweh notes that while traditional men's societies can be found throughout Liberia, they are not always referred to by the same name. Though loosely categorized as "Poro," he emphasized that different groups may have variations in their references to the society (Toweh, 19 September 2000).

Finally, Toweh also explained that there are some ethnic groups in Liberia in which certain members will mark the area between their eyebrows with up to three dark lines. He knew that this occurred in the Gio (also referred to as Dan) and Bassa ethnic groups. However, he emphasized that this may also occur in other groups. Furthermore, he noted that these markings are not found on every member of the group and may be a matter of personal taste (Toweh, 19 September 2000).

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the RIC within time constraints. This response is not, and does not purport to

be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum.

References:

Best, Kenneth. Former Liberian journalist. Currently Executive Director of the Jubilee Center, Inc. 25 August 2000. Telephone Interview.

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Minority Rights Group International. 1997. *World Directory of Minorities.* London: Minority Rights Group International.

Toweh, Solomon. Former Africa Researcher, INS Resource Information Center. 19 September 2000. Telephone Interview.

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