

# Liberia

<b>Response to Information Request Number:</b>	LBR01003.ZAR
<b>Date:</b>	5 October 2000
<b>Subject:</b>	Liberia: Information on the Krahn ethnic group
<b>From:</b>	INS Resource Information Center, Washington, DC
<b>Keywords:</b>	Liberia / Cultural assimilation / Cultural identity / Ethnicity / Indigenous language / Linguistic minorities

## Query:

What language/dialects do the Krahn people speak? Are there cultural distinctions among the Krahn that would differentiate them from other ethnic groups in Liberia? Are the Krahn dispersed throughout Liberia, or only found mainly in Grand Gedeh county? Would it be credible that a member of the Krahn ethnic group would not speak a Krahn dialect, but only English? Is it plausible that a Krahn, born and raised in Monrovia, would not have any knowledge about the Krahn dialect or language or customs?

## Response:

Ezekiel Pajibo, Senior Policy Analyst with Africa Faith and Justice Network, states that there are no major cultural distinctions, such as facial markings or physical attributes, that characterize the Krahn group. He suggests the surname might be an indication of the ethnic group to which an individual belongs. Both Ezekiel Pajibo and a former Africa researcher for the INS Resource Information Center, Solomon Toweh, agree that the primary distinction of a Krahn would be their language, however, it is possible that a member of the Krahn ethnic group would not speak a Krahn dialect (Pajibo 7 Sept. 2000; Toweh 6 Sept. 2000).

*Ethnologue* (1996) cites Krahn dialects as including both Eastern and Western versions of Krahn. Eastern Krahn dialects include Gorbo, Kanneh, Konobo, and Tchien (Chiehn). Western Krahn dialects include Gbo, Gbaeson (Gbaision, Gbarzon), Plo, Biai, Gbarbo, Gborbo (Gbobob), and Kpeaply. Western Krahn also can be found in Cote d'Ivoire, where the dialects include Pewa, Nidru, and Biai (*Ethnologue* 1996, 300).

The Krahn are found throughout Liberia. Though they are particularly in Grand Gedeh and Nimba Counties, they are also found in Monrovia and elsewhere. Because Samuel Doe, the leader who held power in Liberia from 1980 through 1989, was Krahn, many members of that ethnic group moved to Monrovia, the capital, during the 1980s (Toweh, 6 September 2000).

According to Toweh, recent research and conversations with Liberian Krahns have indicated that Krahns born and raised in Monrovia do not necessarily speak any Krahn at all. He pointed to an example of a young woman to whom he had just spoken who was born and raised in Monrovia and does not speak Krahn or know anything about the local customs or language. He says that it is "quite possible to have a Krahn who was born in Monrovia who may not know too much about his culture or language" (Toweh, 12 September 2000). Another thing to consider is that the war in Liberia caused massive internal displacement, further separating individuals from their "tribal" homes and cultural traditions. Toweh pointed out that it would depend on where the individual had been raised and how old the individual was. He also noted that for those children who were raised without their parents or relatives, it is entirely possible that they would not speak Krahn

(Toweh, 6 September 2000).

This statement is confirmed by the Africa Faith and Justice policy analyst. Pajibo states that it is "definitely possible" and "very likely" that a Krahn born and raised in Monrovia would "only speak English." He points out that this is true throughout indigenous culture. Because the Americo-Liberians held power, it was a sign of social mobility to speak English. Indigenous languages, even in the villages, were often discouraged as parents forced their children to speak only English in the home and at school. Pajibo further points out that many parents send their children away to school, where they only speak English and never learn the local language (Pajibo, 7 September 2000).

In Monrovia, Pajibo says, "regardless of where you're from, there's not enough opportunity to speak the language because you find yourself in a social milieu where English is the only language" (Pajibo, 7 September 2000). Because there is minimal opportunity to speak the native language and because English is the language of upward social mobility, it is "very likely that children [in Monrovia] could grow up without speaking Krahn" (Pajibo, 7 September 2000).

Solomon Toweh indicated that while all ethnic groups have some different traditions, these depend on the location of the individual. In Monrovia, an individual might not be exposed any of the distinctive features of "tribal life" that would be found in a village. For example, indigenous "tribal" societies that maintain traditional customs are not found in Monrovia. It is unlikely that if a Krahn were born in Monrovia, he or she would be indoctrinated into "tribal culture" or exposed to the traditional societies.

Finally, the civil war and resulting chaos in Liberia have led to massive internal displacement. By the end of the war in 1996, one million people were internally displaced within Liberia (USCR, 2000). This displacement has profound effects on the situation of individual families, ethnic groups, and cultures.

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**

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