

# Exploring the Linguistic and Cultural Diversity of the Bandiagara Escarpment

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The Bandiagara Escarpment is a refuge and an oasis for diverse Dogon peoples. The Dogon ethnolinguistic group constitutes at least 21 separate languages and upwards of 60 distinct varieties, although Dogon is often considered a cohesive unit.

In addition to the Dogon-inhabited villages, a small farming community is situated upon a boulder below ancient Tellem-constructed cave-like structures at the cliff's southwestern edge.

The Bangande claim that they, and their language Bangime, are a part of the Dogon groups that surround them. The Dogon language group stands alone as a single branch of the over-arching Niger-Congo language phylum that stretches across much of West, Central, and portions of Southern Africa. Linguists consider Bangime a language isolate.

Located in Central Eastern Mali, the cliffs shelter inhabitants from the quickly encroaching Sahara Desert from the north. The mountain range also allows the Niger River to flood valleys into the southwest edges of the cliff, providing a means for irrigating fields and gardens. Due to a long-standing taboo, neither the Dogon group nor the Bangande intermarries with their closest neighbors to the west, Bozo cultivators displaced from their better-known fishing counterparts who live along the Niger River. Their language belongs to the Mande family which is another early Niger-Congo offshoot.

Mande peoples have occupied much of West Africa at least since the reign of their two empires: Soninke and Mali. The Songhay Empire whose peoples and languages remain to this day just to the north of the Bandiagara Escarpment occurred between the two Mande empires. Songhay is one more group of languages without a certain higher affiliation. The Bandiagara Escarpment is bordered to the east by the contemporary country of Burkina Faso where disparate Gur languages and peoples are spoken and live.

The capital of the cliff range that gives it its name, [*bàndzà gàrà*], translates to 'a large wooden eating bowl for offering food during ceremonies'. The mosaic of the people who continually surround such a bowl have certainly lived along and adjacent to the shield for centuries, yet their connections to each other and those outside of the area are still unknown.

The purpose of the introduction to this workshop is to provide a forum for delving into the depths of the Bandiagara Cliffs and basins by beginning and providing background to the discussion of its foundations.