



PROJECT PROFILE

Dogon Old Testament

THE INTRIGUE

The 665,300 Dogon of West Africa live in one of the bleakest, most isolated places on earth, yet they have intrigued anthropologists and photo-journalists the world over. Located just south of the Sahara and west of the River Niger along the southeastern border of Mali, the Dogon live as cliff dwellers beneath the imposing Bandiagara escarpment, which towers 2,000 feet above the Gondo plains. Over 700 villages with nearly 500 inhabitants each, dot the base of the 125-mile long escarpment.

THE FORTRESS

The gigantic cliffs provide a natural fortress for the Dogon. Nevertheless, each family lives in a fortress-like compound as well. Compounds are flat-roofed adobe huts encircling a small courtyard and girded by a thick wall. At the corners of each compound stand cylindrical or rectangular granary towers made of adobe and topped with cone-shaped hats of sorghum thatch.

The huts have no windows, only ventilation holes near the roof. Doorways are high off the ground and must be accessed by climbing a notched sapling. To discourage intruders, these climbing poles can be pulled up to the roof where the family sleeps on warm nights. If facing attack, villagers can also hoist themselves up the face of the massive cliffs using handmade ropes and hide in the thousands of caverns that dot the towering walls.

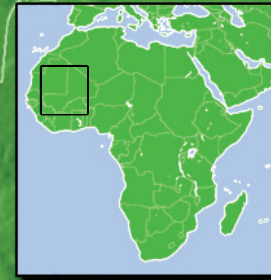
THE SHADOW

The Dogon live in the cool shadows of the escarpment not only for relief from the blazing sun, but for protection from a more foreboding shadow as well. It is thought the Dogon originally migrated from Egypt several hundred years ago to escape the ever-lengthening shadow of the dominant religion to the north. However, that shadow continued to haunt them as Arabian raiding parties tried to capture them as slaves. The cliffs provided some fortification; attackers on horseback could not negotiate the steep walls or ride across the field of boulders below. Raiders on foot faced the challenge of scaling fortified compounds with no ground level openings or attempting daring searches of endless caverns hundreds of feet in the air. As Dogons banded together to oppose the threat, they developed tightly knit communities that value group harmony, dependence and responsibility.

THE STRUGGLE

As subsistence grain farmers, the Dogon struggle daily to make a living in the harsh semi-arid environment known as the Sahel. Though they often face a blazing sun, intense heat, drought and dusty harmattan winds, the villagers labor communally, sowing and harvesting their crops by hand. Principle crops are fonio, pearl millet and sorghum, which have short growing seasons and survive in rocky sandy soil with little irrigation. The Dogon also grow onions, peanuts, beans, maize, sesame and

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- **Location:** Mali, Africa
- **Number of Speakers:** 665,300
490,000 in Mali
138,000 in Burkina Faso
37,300 in Ivory Coast
- **Project Goal:** Completion of Old Testament plus New Testament revision
- **Year Project Began:** 2003
- **Expected Completion Date:** 2010



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African rice. Some own a few sheep, goats or cattle as well. Dogon make their own clothing from cotton they grow, spinning it into thread and then weaving it into clothes, before dyeing it with traditional patterns of black, white and red. Men traditionally are the stonecutters, builders, masons, woodcarvers, metal smiths and basket weavers of the community. Women traditionally make pottery for cooking and tend to crops.

THE MYSTERY

Since their early origins in Egypt, the Dogon have been mysteriously obsessed with the star Sirius and the white dwarf star that revolves around it. They believed Sirius to be the “navel” of the universe from which all souls emanate and to which all return. Their ancient artwork often depicts mystical cosmological symbols, especially Sirius and its dwarf star. Since the dwarf star cannot be seen with the naked eye, this cultural obsession is a great mystery and has been a matter of some controversy among scholars and mystics. Their complex traditional beliefs also include ancestralism, spiritism, totemism, shamanism, animism and cultism.

THE DREAM

Though 45% of Dogon speakers claim adherence to the dominant religion in the north, most still hold to their mysterious traditional beliefs as well. In spite of this, the Dogon are one of five major ethnic groups in Mali who have responded positively to the Gospel. In 1997, the Dogon church dedicated the New Testament in their language and the first printing sold out. Today 20% have become Christians and the church is growing fast.

There is a great need for trained Dogon pastors to encourage further growth of the church and help it stand against the dominant religion. Though 99% of church services are rural and conducted in the Dogon language, pastors are faced with the challenge of learning another language in order to attend seminary. The translation of the entire Dogon Bible opens up the opportunity to introduce the Dogon language into the Ebenezer Bible School, allowing pastors to receive further Bible training and spurring on the spiritual growth of the church. The complete translation would encourage the youth to commit themselves to Bible studies.

Greater access to the Word of God assists the spiritually mature leadership in evangelizing unreached people groups in Mali, a nation in which 90% adhere to the dominant religion.

Two experienced and well-equipped translators, Timothée and Josué, have begun work on the Old Testament, with the spiritual and moral support of a translation committee made up of mature, Christian Malians. Reviewing groups comprised of trained Dogon pastors and lay people assist in the translation revision process. Through prayer, education and the special emphasis on local involvement of the population, the Dogons’ dream of having the entire Bible in their own language may be realized, allowing both pastors and lay people to effectively share and grow in the truth of God’s Word.

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Financial and prayer partners will play an important role in this project. Financial partners will provide vital funds for national translators' salaries, consultant travel, reference books, workshops, computer equipment and other office needs. Prayer supporters will also be a constant source of encouragement to Timothée, Josué and their team as they undertake this tremendous task on behalf of their people.