

# EXPEDITIONARY CULTURE FIELD GUIDE



## BENIN



U.S. AIR FORCE



# About this Guide

This guide is designed to prepare you to deploy to culturally complex environments and achieve mission objectives. The fundamental information contained within will help you understand the cultural dimension of your assigned location and gain skills necessary for success (Photo: Beninese medics perform routine physical examinations on local residents of Wanrarou, Benin).



The guide consists of 2 parts:

Part 1 introduces “Culture General,” the foundational knowledge you need to operate effectively in any global environment.

Part 2 presents “Culture Specific” Benin, focusing on unique cultural features of Beninese society and is designed to complement other pre-deployment training. It applies culture-general concepts to help increase your knowledge of your assigned deployment location



(Photo: Beninese Army Soldier practices baton strikes during peacekeeping training with US Marine in Bembereke, Benin).

For further information, visit the Air Force Culture and

Language Center (AFCLC) website at [www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/](http://www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/) or contact AFCLC’s Region Team at [AFCLC.Region@us.af.mil](mailto:AFCLC.Region@us.af.mil).

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## PART 1 – CULTURE GENERAL

### What is Culture?

Fundamental to all aspects of human existence, culture shapes the way humans view life and functions as a tool we use to adapt to our social and physical environments. A culture is the sum of all of the beliefs, values, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning for a society. All human beings have culture, and individuals within a culture share a general set of beliefs and values.



Members of a culture also usually assign the same meanings to the symbols in that culture. A symbol is when one thing – an image, word, object, idea, or story – represents another thing. For example, the American flag is a physical and visual

symbol of a core American value – freedom. At the same time, the story of George Washington admitting to having chopped down a cherry tree is also symbolic, representing the importance Americans place on personal honesty and leadership integrity.

### Force Multiplier

The military services have learned through experience the importance of understanding other cultures. Unlike the 20th-century bipolar world order that dominated US strategy for nearly half a century, today the US military is operating in what we classify as asymmetric or irregular conflict zones where the notion of cross-cultural interactions is on the leading edge of our engagement strategies.

We have come to view the people themselves, rather than the political system or physical environment, as the decisive feature in conflict areas. Our primary objective hinges on influencing constructive change through peaceful means where possible. We achieve this endeavor by encouraging local

nationals to focus on developing stable political, social, and economic institutions that reflect their cultural beliefs and traditions.

Therefore, understanding the basic concepts of culture serves as a force multiplier. Achieving an awareness and respect of a society's values and beliefs enables deploying forces to build relationships with people from other cultures, positively influence their actions, and ultimately achieve mission success.

### **Cultural Domains**

Culture is not just represented by the beliefs we carry internally, but also by our behaviors and by the systems members of a culture create to organize their lives. These systems, such as political or educational institutions, help us to live in a manner that is appropriate to our culture and encourages us to perpetuate that culture into the future.

We can organize these behaviors and systems into categories – what the Air Force refers to as “cultural domains” – in order to better understand the primary values and characteristics of a society. A cross-culturally competent military member can use these domains – which include kinship, language and communication, and social and political systems among others (see chart on next page) – as tools for understanding and adapting to any culture. For example, by understanding the ways different cultures define family or kinship, a deployed military member can more effectively interact with members of that culture.

### **Social Behaviors Across Cultures**

While humankind shares basic behaviors, various groups enact or even group those behaviors differently across cultural boundaries. For example, all societies obtain food for survival, although agrarian societies generally produce their own food for limited consumption using very basic techniques.



Conversely, industrialized nations have more sophisticated

market economies, producing foodstuffs for universal consumption. Likewise, all cultures value history and tradition, although they represent these concepts through a variety of unique forms of symbolism. While the dominant world religions share the belief in one God, their worship practices vary with their traditional historical development. Similarly, in many kin-based cultures where familial bonds are foundational to social identity, it is customary for family or friends to serve as godparents, while for other societies this practice is nearly non-existent.

**Worldview**

One of our basic human behaviors is the tendency to classify others as similar or different according to our cultural standard.



As depicted in the chart below, we can apply the 12 cultural domains to help us compare similarities and differences across cultures. We evaluate others' behavior to determine if they are "people like me" or "people not like me." Consequently, we assume

that individuals falling into the "like me" category share our perspectives and values.



This collective perspective forms our worldview – how we see the world and understand our place in it. Your worldview functions as a lens through which you see and understand the world. It helps you to interpret your experiences and the values and behaviors of other people that you encounter. Consider your worldview as a way of framing behavior, providing an accountability standard for our actions and a logical explanation of why we individually or collectively act in a certain manner.

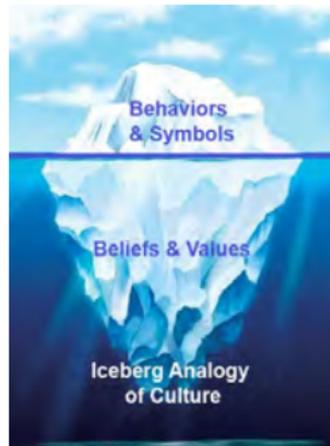
### Cultural Belief System

An important component of a worldview is our belief system. A community's belief system sets its universal standards of what is good and bad, defines right and wrong behavior, and assigns a value of meaningful or meaningless. Our beliefs form the fundamental values we hold to be true – regardless of whether there is physical evidence to support these ideas. Beliefs are a central facet of human culture. They are shared views about world order and how the universe was physically and socially constructed.

While all people have beliefs, their specific components tend to vary depending upon respective world views. What people classify as good or bad, right or wrong depends on our deeply-held beliefs we started developing early in life that have help shape our characters. Likewise, these values are ingrained in our personalities and shape our behavior patterns and our self-identities. Because cultural beliefs are intensely held, they are difficult, though not impossible, to change.

### Core Beliefs

Core beliefs shape and influence certain behaviors and also serve to rationalize those behaviors. Therefore, knowledge of individual or group beliefs can be useful in comprehending or making sense of their activities. We will use the iceberg model for classifying culture to illustrate two levels of meaning, as depicted. Beliefs and values, portrayed by the



deeper and greater level of the submerged iceberg, are seldom visible, but are indicated / hinted at / referenced by our behaviors and symbols (top level). It is important to recognize, though, that the parts of culture that are not visible (under the waterline) are informing and shaping what is being made visible (above the waterline).

In many cases, different worldviews may present behaviors that are contrary to our own beliefs, particularly in many regions where US forces deploy. Your ability to suspend judgment in order to understand another perspective is essential to establishing relationships with your host-nation counterparts. The ability to withhold your opinion and strive to understand a culture from a member of that culture's perspective is known as cultural relativism. It often involves taking an alternate perspective when interpreting others' behaviors and is critical to your ability to achieve mission success.

As you travel throughout the African Continent, you will encounter cultural patterns of meaning that are common among most African countries. What follows is a general description of 12 cultural domains which are used to frame those commonalities.

## CULTURAL DOMAINS

### 1. History and Myth

History and myth are related concepts. History is a record of the past that is based on verifiable facts and events. Myth can act as a type of historical record, although it is usually a story which members of a culture use to explain community origins or important events that are not verifiable or which occurred prior to written language.



Africa has a history that spans the entire existence of humankind. In ancient times prior to the emergence of written languages, history and wisdom were preserved across generations and

ethnic boundaries through oral folk legends or myths. Most early human evolution began as hunting and gathering cultures in East and South Africa, with countries such as Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, and South Africa renowned for their early human sites. In the last several millennia, the development of agriculture and pastoralism (animal herding) replaced hunting and gathering lifestyles (Photo: *Kutubiyya Mosque* courtesy of CultureGrams, ProQuest, 2013).

Ancient civilizations evolved in all corners of Africa, inspired in part by peoples from the Middle East bringing trade, beliefs, customs, language, and on occasion, colonization. Far from being isolated empires, the African civilizations were intimately connected by commerce and marriage throughout various regions of the continent, and when confronted by outsiders, managed to adapt to their influences. Eventually, Arab traders introduced Islam to Africa and also instituted the Trans-Saharan African slave trade that lasted from the 7th to 19th Centuries.

The “golden age” of European exploration, which lasted from the 18th to mid-20th century, prompted the wholesale exploitation of Africans resources – first human assets through slavery, followed by natural resources such as minerals, precious gems and metals, and wildlife, thereby diminishing most of what was traditional and African.

The introduction of the European Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade altered the slave trade through both the sheer number of Africans enslaved and through the cementing of a racist ideology of Black inferiority to legitimize the institution of slavery. Slavery decimated the African continent for over 400 years through the forced relocation of an estimated 25 to 30 million Africans worldwide. This figure does not include those Africans who died aboard ships or during capture. While abolition of the slave trade dissolved the institution of slavery, it did not end the European



presence on the African continent nor did it drastically alter their attitudes towards Africans.

Starting in the mid-19th century, European colonialism served to redefine African ethnic relations on a large scale; however, as African societies began to resist colonial rule and seek their independence, widespread ethnic conflict and genocide occurred. Sustained westernization and globalization continue to shape the continent through poverty, disease, and social reform. A history still to be recorded, Africa's future identity faces many challenges in critical areas such as environmental change, ethnic strife, women's health and security, and education.

## 2. Political and Social Relations

Political relations are the ways in which members of a community organize leadership, power, and authority. Social relations are all of the ways in which individuals are linked to others in their community.

Traditional African political organizations in the form of bands, tribes, and chiefdoms have existed for several millennia and continue to influence contemporary African governments. Uncommon in modern society, bands are limited to hunting and gathering economies, such as the !Kung of the southern African Kalahari Desert and foragers of central African forests.



Tribes are still represented today across the African political landscape, although the use of the word "tribe" is sometimes misinterpreted due to its western notion of "primitiveness" and oftentimes substituted with the term "ethnic group." Lacking centralized authority, tribes are organized around segmented descent groups or in some cases age groups.

Everyday governance is discharged through councils of respected elders and sanctioned through ritual and other means. East African pastoralist groups such as the Maasai,

along with some West African tribes and the Berbers in North Africa, represent this type of organization.

Chiefdoms or kingdoms are ruled by kings or queens from a royal clan and generally incorporate millions of subjects. Kingdoms such as the Zulu or Swazi in southern Africa developed through conquest, while others like Ghana's Ashante developed through an association of related traditional states. However, colonialism eventually diluted the power and reach of these empires, whose leaders were often retained as indirect rulers or figureheads.



Today, all three of these political organizations still exist, although in the confines of modern African nation-states created by colonial powers who had little regard or understanding of African cultures. This juxtaposition of modernity with tradition has caused severe conflict throughout the continent.

Challenged to construct their respective “national” identities, regional leaders attempt to do so by diluting the traditionally cohesive power of ancestry. These national ruling elites, who derive their power from wealth and commerce rather than tribal affiliation, feel threatened by loyalty to these traditional organizations, labeling their rule as “tribalism.”

This “class versus descent” scrimmage for power has resulted in conflicts across the continent and a dramatic divergence of interests. As a means to overcome these and other issues on the continent, a 55-nation federation, the African Union (AU), was formed in 2002. AU's charter is to promote “greater unity and solidarity between African countries and peoples” by building partnerships in all segments of “civil society.”

### 3. Religion and Spirituality

Religion is a cultural belief system that provides meaning to members of a community. Religious and spiritual beliefs help preserve the social order by defining proper behavior. They also create social unity by defining shared identity, offer

individuals peace of mind, and explain the causes of events in a society. Prior to the arrival of Islam and Christianity, the African continent consisted of orally transmitted indigenous religious practices. As in many societies, African indigenous beliefs influenced diet, subsistence patterns, family structures, marriage practices, and healing and burial processes. In essence, Africans constructed their worldview through their indigenous religions.



Today, the African continent is primarily either Muslim or Christian. Other faiths such as Judaism and Hinduism exist as pockets in different regions of the continent, primarily in urban areas. The historical trajectories of Islamic and Christian

expansion in Africa offer intriguing commonalities in how Africans across the continent initially reacted to the introduction of each of those religions. For example, it is common throughout the continent to find a blending of many elements of indigenous religious practices with local Islam and Christianity (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia).

Consequently, many African native religions share similarities with religions such as Christianity, Islam, and Judaism in their understanding of God as the creator and ruler of all life, although He is considered untouchable by humans.

However, unlike Christianity and Islam, many African indigenous religions believe that God is not directly involved in people's lives. To them there is a spirit world populated with former good and bad human beings. The good spirits intercede with God on behalf of their living families to whom they then relay God's will through dreams and acquired possessions. The bad spirits work to bring misfortune through sickness,



death, or natural disasters to those who behave inappropriately.

Many indigenous African religions revere "nature" spirits living in the sky, water, and forests. These impersonal spirits help protect people from harm and provide them with life's essential ingredients such as water, sun, and wildlife. This belief system is commonly referred to as animism.

Just as spirits mediate relations between God and humans, religious specialists act as mediators between spirits and humans to provide protection from harm.

#### 4. Family and Kinship

The domain of family and kinship refers to groups of people related through blood ties, marriage, or through strong emotional bonds that influence them to treat each other like family members (often called "fictive kin"). The traditional African family with respect to marriage, family structure, and descent is a much different arrangement than is found in most American families. Likewise, there are several components of the traditional African family that are common to all African cultures.



First, perhaps the most difficult feature to reconcile to Americans is that of polygyny – the practice of a husband having more than one wife. A benefit of this arrangement is that it promotes societal alliances through marriage, procreation, and family wealth through female labor.

Second, due to polygyny, the family in most African cultures has historically consisted of an expanded set of kin or relatives that extends well beyond the American notion of a nuclear family. This arrangement created a family environment where children considered all siblings as "brothers and sisters" and all of the wives/mothers as "mother."

Third, the extended African family traces descent through either the male or female side of the family, a practice which differs considerably from the American family. Patrilineal descent (through the male side of the family) is the more common approach and usually features polygyny. The matrilineal (through the female bloodline) marriage pattern is more uncommon and almost always features monogamy – it is rare to encounter a wife having more than one husband.

Lastly, it is common for two or more blood lines (lineages) to share a common ancestor and collectively form a clan, which is the largest social unit. Clans do not have formal leaders or organizational structures. Membership is transferred from father to child and cuts across ethnic and social boundaries.

The dramatic social changes in Africa during and after colonialism in the last 4 decades have obviously affected the traditional family, and variations on these 3 features can be found across the continent.

## 5. Sex and Gender

Sex refers to the biological/reproductive differences between males and females, while gender is a more flexible concept that refers to a culture's categorizing of masculine and feminine behaviors, symbols, and social roles. Gender roles in Africa follow no single model nor is there a generalized concept of sex and common standard of sexual behavior.

Prehistorically, gender role differentiation in Africa's hunting and gathering cultures was based on a division of labor featuring different, yet complementary, sets of responsibilities for males and females, adults and children. Females gathered

over half the caloric needs from natural vegetation, while also reproducing and raising offspring. Males were primarily hunters but also assisted with gathering.

These gender patterns continued as agricultural practices advanced.



Females shared in farming while continuing to provide for the family's subsistence, and males produced the cash crops. Pastoralists like the Maasai of Kenya traditionally have featured males involved in cattle-raising and females in food production.

The 19th-century European colonial period introduced a cash economy into Africa, with female labor used to produce the cash crops. By inserting male authority over females, colonial administrators disrupted the distinct yet complementary male/female relationship that had been traditionally African.

More recently, western influence across the continent has dramatically altered the traditional gender roles. Educational and professional opportunities for females, along with increased family migrations to urban areas, have radically altered traditional male and female gender roles.

Likewise, the number of singles parents and even child- or other relative-led families has increased with the predominance of HIV/AIDS-related deaths and warfare, further altering traditional gender responsibilities. Additionally, ethnic conflicts involving abuse of women are prevalent in many unstable countries, and while the rubric of traditional African gender generally remains, the forces of change are gradually ripping it away.

## 6. Language and Communication

Language is a system for sharing information symbolically, whereby words are used to represent ideas. Communication is defined as the cultural practice of sharing meaning in interaction, both verbally and non-verbally. America is predominantly a monolingual society, where traditionally, fluency in a second language has been considered a luxury rather than a necessity.



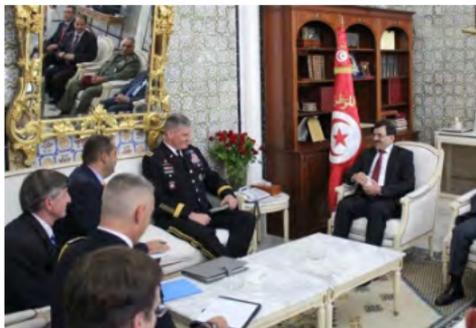
Conversely, national survival for many societies in Africa required them throughout their existence to adopt multilingual

practices, if for no other reason than to preserve their native heritage.

You may find it challenging to comprehend the scope of Africa's linguistic diversity. There are over 2,000 African languages (many spoken-only) from 6 major language families, and perhaps 100 of these languages are used to communicate among the more dominant ethnic groups such as Berber, Swahili, Yoruba, and others.

Official languages of African nation-states are few, yet the linguistic diversity expressed across the continent (Nigeria has 250 languages) has prompted an awareness of the value of Africa's linguistic traditions. While most areas of the continent speak the adopted language of their colonial past – such as French and Portuguese in West Africa, French and Arabic in Morocco, and English in Kenya and South Africa – the majority of people also speak one or more traditional “indigenous” languages of their and other ethnic groups. As African independence spread throughout the continent, ethnic groups continued to depend on their indigenous identifiers, such as language, to celebrate their “release” from colonial rule and to

preserve a sense of indigenous identity.



While communication styles tend to vary by ethnic or social groups, Africans generally are friendly and outgoing people although they tend to communicate with reserve to avoid

confrontation. As in most kin-based societies, Africans believe that saving face or protecting one's honor and dignity are of utmost importance; therefore, they avoid public criticism and controversial topics at all costs – even to the extent of withholding their honest opinion or modifying the truth.

Africans admire and even expect extended greetings and small talk, and to attempt to rush or avoid social graces is considered disrespectful. Similarly, Africans avoid direct eye contact when communicating with new acquaintances and people of status,

particularly elders. They also are fond of non-verbal gestures, and it is common throughout African societies for members of the same gender to hold hands or touch while conversing.

## 7. Learning and Knowledge

All cultures require that the older generation transmit important information to the younger generation. This information can be strictly factual (for example, how to fulfill subsistence and health requirements) and culturally traditional (the beliefs, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning to the community). This knowledge transfer may occur through structured, formalized systems such as schools or through informal learning by watching adults or peers.



The contemporary African educational system hardly resembles the traditional pre-colonial structure, whereby community elders were primarily responsible for preparing youth for adulthood. Their instruction included fundamentals of ethnic ritual and ceremony, along with customary protocol for their distinctive gender roles. A rite-of-passage commemorating their successful journey from childhood to adulthood served as a form of graduation.

European colonialism brought a more structured, formal educational system that catered to a small group of African elite who demonstrated potential to administer expanding colonial territories. Following independence, many African nations adopted the European system because they believed it would prepare them to be more competitive in intra-continental and global marketplaces, thereby enhancing their quality of life.

However, progress in developing and maintaining reliable educational institutions has been slow for a variety of reasons. Since most Africans live in rural environments, they continue to rely heavily on child labor for family survival, resulting in decreased school enrollments or early withdrawals. Likewise, widespread HIV/AIDS epidemics, ethnic conflict, teacher and resource deficits, and inaccessibility to remote rural areas also hamper progress. According to 2017 statistics, only 80% of the

continent's children were enrolled in primary school, leaving over 33 million African children without any schooling at all.

## 8. Time and Space

In every society, people occupy space and time in ways that are not directly linked to physical survival. In low-context western cultures, people tend to be preoccupied with strict time management, devoting less effort to relationship-building. Conversely, most African cultures are traditionally high-context societies, whereby people center their activities on socializing and establishing close associations, having little regard for the passage-of-time.

Only after establishing trust and honor will your typical African counterpart agreeably proceed with business. In his worldview, time is a precious commodity used to establish relationships



and form alliances. Any attempt to accelerate the tempo at the expense of social pleasantries will likely result in deadlock.

To an African, close physical proximity between individuals encourages cooperative trust, and for centuries they have viewed human linkage as

a core element to survival. This closeness is best represented in a traditional African village where strong kinship connections are evidenced by a display of close interpersonal relations among family members.

While conventional African concepts of time and space remain intact, throughout the continent western influence and globalization have stepped up the pace of African living, mostly in urban areas. Consequently, rural-to-urban migrations have reshaped traditional social and subsistence patterns.

## 9. Aesthetics and Recreation

Every culture has its own forms of creative expression that are guided by aesthetic principles of imagination, beauty, skill and style. Prior to 19th-century European colonization of Africa,

recreation served a vital subsistence role, whereby adolescents and adults alike participated in intellectually stimulating leisurely activities that concurrently served to develop essential hunting and pastoral skills.

Games of chance and skill were important to early childhood development, providing social outlets within and outside their community. Featuring wrestling, jumping and running; traditional African sport was steeped in religious ritual.



Along with colonialism came the introduction to Africa of western sports such as soccer, cricket, rugby and track and field. This emphasis on western sport continued to thrive with African independence and globalization, as seen in sporting events such as the Olympics and the World Cup.

Leaders such as Nelson Mandela skillfully employed sport to promote a unified South African nation. Importing the predominantly “white” game of rugby, Mandela used it to fuse a racially divided country following his election in 1992. This event is the theme of the motion picture “Invictus,” exemplifying how sport can serve to create national identities and overcome ethnic division. His efforts have inspired many other African nations to follow suit.



Likewise, East African countries such as Kenya and Ethiopia have produced the world's dominant male and female distance runners, and South Africa, Cameroon and Nigeria emerged as strong contenders in the 2010 World Cup. African nations are now competing in leagues such as the International Basketball Association (FIBA) World Championships, and there is also a

growing number of African basketball players on US college campuses and in the National Basketball Association (NBA).

## 10. Sustenance and Health

Societies have different methods of transforming natural resources into food. These methods can shape residence patterns, family structures and economics. Theories of disease and healing practices exist in all cultures and serve as adaptive responses to disease and illness.

Despite having only 17% of the global population, Africa is a victim of many of the world's debilitating health disorders. According to the World Health Organization, 70% of the global HIV/AIDS cases and 92% of malarial diseases occur in Africa.



These and other medical conditions are attributed primarily to viral infection and widespread poverty caused by extreme climatic conditions and civil unrest, coupled with inadequate preventative measures. While extensive drought generates widespread famine, civil disturbances generate millions of displaced persons. Likewise, with only 63% of the Sub-Saharan African population having access to safe drinking water, water-borne bacterial diseases such as cholera and schistosomiasis are common.



Many people in Africa lack access to western medicine, and as a result depend on traditional health practices to combat disease. In addition, some traditional beliefs run counter to western medical practice and perhaps discourage individuals from utilizing those services even when they are available. This

problem is further intensified by lack of federal regulatory healthcare management.

While modern healthcare procedures are more common in urban areas, many rural people rely on traditional practitioners who use a variety of plants and herbs to treat patients. Similarly, many families have their own secret remedies. While in some cases traditional medicine proves effective with fewer side effects than modern drugs, traditional practices do not adequately treat many of the more serious conditions.

On a positive note, western influence has stimulated some progress in combating Africa's health crisis. More resources are devoted to achieving basic human security by assessing disease symptoms early and with scientific accuracy.

## 11. Economics and Resources

This domain refers to beliefs regarding appropriate ways for a society to produce, distribute, and consume goods and services. Traditionally having an agrarian-based economy, Africa today remains predominantly agricultural, featuring less industrialization than most other parts of the world. Post-colonial adversities such as civil war, disease, poverty, and unstable dictatorships posed unusual hardship on several young African nations; however, Africa currently stands at the cross-roads of economic development with many nations becoming some of the fastest growing regions in the world.



Colonialism institutionalized the exploitation of Africa's mineral resources, resulting in today's oil industry dominating the economic market in several coastal regions. A surge in global oil prices; a growing African middle class; and reduction in civil wars, foreign aid, and inflation collectively promise a more positive outlook for the future.

Countries such as Botswana, Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, and South Africa are economically the wealthiest on the continent, with regions such as East Africa showing signs of economic stability. Despite the economic upswing, much of sub-Saharan

Africa's future economic prosperity is held hostage by devastating diseases such as AIDS, particularly in areas of southern Africa, and the growing effects of climate change and man-made environmental degradation throughout the subcontinent.

## 12. Technology and Material

Societies use technology to transform their physical world, and culture heavily influences the development and use of technology. Africa lags far behind most of the world in manufacturing capacity and output. Even the more economically-developed nations such as South Africa are competitively weak when compared to non-African industrialized nations. During the 1970s and 1980s, Africa experienced some growth in raw exports although this increase did little to boost long-term manufacturing capacity.

Today, Africa is experiencing an actual decline in manufacturing capacity due primarily to a lull in the global economy, along with other indigenous issues such as environmental stress, poor physical and organizational infrastructure, and a shortage of skilled personnel. Likewise, African manufacturing capacity is no match against global powers such as China and significant Southeast Asian markets.



International aid from both governmental and non-governmental organizations has helped African nations establish preliminary economic footholds. For example, many of them have dedicated industrial developmental zones to attract foreign investment and increase export-related manufacturing capacity, although Africa is far removed from having a significant role in the global marketplace in the foreseeable future.

Now that we have introduced general concepts that characterize African society at large, we will now focus on specific features of Beninese society.

## PART 2 – CULTURE SPECIFIC

### 1. HISTORY AND MYTH

#### Overview

Known as Dahomey until 1972, the region of modern-day Benin was historically home to many ethnic groups. In the 17th century, the Kingdom of Dahomey grew powerful through slave trade with Europeans. Succumbing to French expansionist plans, Dahomey became a colony within French West Africa in the late 19th century. Gaining independence in 1960, Dahomey struggled through political upheaval before entering a period of military control as a Marxist-Leninist state. Since transitioning to multi-party democracy in 1991, Benin has seen multiple peaceful transitions of power, becoming one of sub-Saharan Africa's most stable countries despite remaining one of the world's poorest (Photo: A Beninese woman carries her laundry while walking with her son back to her village).



#### Early History

Scholars know little about the early history of the territory comprising modern-day Benin. Hunter-gatherer groups likely roamed the region, where small kingdoms probably rose and fell. The highly-developed Benin Empire that dominated much of southern Nigeria from the 15th-19th centuries never included any territory of modern-day Benin.

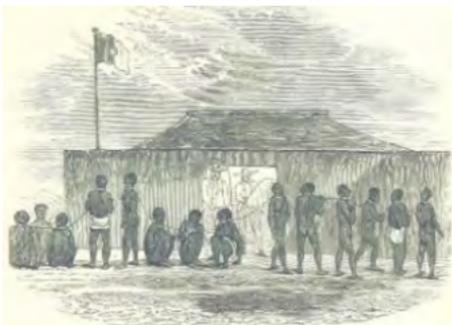
#### The Rise of Kingdoms

Between the 14th-17th centuries, the Aja people migrated from Tado (in modern-day Togo) to establish a kingdom at the town of Allada, somewhat inland from Benin's Gulf of Guinea coast. According to tradition, three brothers fought for the throne of Allada in the early 17th century. When the oldest brother

triumphed, the others left to establish their own kingdoms, one founding Hogbonou near the coast with the other establishing Abomey further inland. All three kingdoms paid tribute to the powerful Yoruba Kingdom of Oyo in modern-day Nigeria. Meanwhile, the Bariba people migrated west from Nigeria to establish a cluster of states in the North, while Ouidah emerged as an important kingdom on the coast.

### The Arrival of Europeans and the Slave Trade

Portuguese ships passed Benin's southern coast in 1472, seeking a sea route to India. Some 200 years passed before the Portuguese began small-scale trade with local residents. Afterwards, the Portuguese established a trading post at Hogbonou, which they renamed Porto-Novo (Benin's capital today). Regular trade with Benin's coastal inhabitants began in earnest in the 17th century, when Dutch, English, French, and other Europeans arrived. The region's principal export was slaves, traded for manufactured items from Europe (Illustration: 1851 depiction of slave traders and their slaves in Dahomey).



In the second half of the 17th century, the slave trade flourished with the increased demand for slave labor in the Americas, and Europeans began calling the region the "Slave Coast." By the beginning of the 18th century, Benin's coastal settlements of Ouidah, Porto-Novo, and Grand-Popo exported as many as 20,000 slaves per year, predominantly war captives from the entire region of modern-day Benin. These slaves took their beliefs and traditions with them to the New World, evidenced by the survival of **Voudoun** (or **Voodoo** – see p. 1-3 of *Religion and Spirituality*) and other Beninese cultural elements among certain Afro-American and Afro-Caribbean communities even today.

### The Kingdom of Dahomey

The Atlantic slave trade brought new weapons to the region, intensifying conflict among local kingdoms. The Europeans

initially focused their trade relations with Benin's coastal kingdoms, and eventually other communities sought to profit from the lucrative slave trade. Seeking direct access to European traders on the coast, King Agaja of inland Abomey began a period of expansive growth in the 18th century. Abomey eventually conquered Allada in 1724 and took the coastal Kingdom of Ouidah in 1727. Also known as Abomey after its capital city, the resulting Kingdom of Dahomey became the region's dominant power, encompassing much of coastal and central Benin. Meanwhile, Porto-Novo successfully resisted Dahomey attacks and remained independent, and around 1730, the Yoruba Kingdom of Oyo attacked and defeated Dahomey. For the next almost 100 years, Dahomey maintained its independence while paying tribute to Oyo.

A militaristic Kingdom with a highly trained army, Dahomey was well-known among Europeans, who favorably compared it to ancient Greece by labeling it "Black Sparta." Within its rigidly stratified society, the ruler's authority was absolute and supported by an elaborate cult of ancestor king worship that included human sacrifices at annual public ceremonies. The Kingdom successfully united disparate communities by intermarriage and the imposition of uniform laws, in the process fashioning a new national identity, the Fon, that is Benin's largest ethnic group today (see p. 11 of *Political and Social Relations*).

Dahomey was also renowned for its contingent of female warriors, the **Mino** ("our mothers"). Admired for their valor and skill, the *Mino* likely began in the 1720s as a palace guard drawn from the king's wives. By the mid-19th century, *Mino* warriors comprised about 1/3rd of Dahomey's army (Illustration: 19th-century depiction of a *Mino* warrior, called "Amazon" by Europeans).



Dahomey continued to conquer new territories throughout the 18th century. It supported its expansionist wars by capturing slaves to work its royal plantations and also trade them to Europeans for weapons and

other manufactured goods. Dahomey captured slaves during its regional conquests and slaving raids in the territories of the Yoruba in the East and Bariba in the North. Historians estimate that Dahomey supplied up to 20% of the slaves sold to Europeans in the 18th century, trading with British, French, and Portuguese primarily at Ouidah. Dahomey's slaving activities were destabilizing, reducing the region's adult population by about 20% and prompting many inhabitants to flee.

### Decline of the Slave Trade

Dahomey achieved its height of power under Kings Guézo (r. 1818-58) and Glélé (r. 1858-89). Ruling from royal palaces in Abomey, Guézo defeated the Kingdom of Oyo in 1823, freeing Dahomey from its tributary payments. Conversely, Glélé's attempts at eastward expansion were defeated by the powerful state of Abeokuta in modern-day Nigeria.

By the mid-19th century, the slave trade was in decline due to European efforts to abolish it. The Europeans abandoned their fortified posts at Ouidah as British warships began to patrol the Atlantic for slaving ships. Occasionally, the British confiscated their slave cargo and released the Africans on the coasts of present-day Sierra Leone, even though far from their homelands.



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With the slave trade declining, King Guézo (depicted in an 1851 illustration) sought other sources of income, primarily the export of palm oil produced by slaves on the royal plantations. In 1852, a British naval blockade forced King Guézo to accept a treaty abolishing the slave trade, yet Dahomey largely disregarded the agreement.

Consequently, the Kingdom continued to capture and export slaves to the US until 1865 and to Brazil and the Caribbean until 1885.

Nevertheless, the less lucrative palm oil exports could not make up for the dwindling slave trade. Under King Glélé, Dahomey declined economically, scaled back its *Mino* corps and reduced its military campaigns.

## French Colonial Expansion

Meanwhile, Europeans became increasingly interested in the region's palm oil and peanuts, driving colonial competition between the British, based on the Gold Coast (modern-day Ghana), and the French on the Ivory Coast (modern day Côte d'Ivoire). In 1842, the French reoccupied their fort at Ouidah in pursuit of the palm oil trade, then signed a treaty with King Guézo in 1851 securing their right to trade at Ouidah.



A decade later, the British annexed Lagos (in modern-day Nigeria), sparking fears of Britain's expansionist ambitions in Benin. Seeking military support, the king of Porto-Novo agreed to allow the French to establish a base of power and make his Kingdom a French protectorate in 1863. To further secure their foothold in the area, the French negotiated an agreement with Dahomey's King Glélé in 1878 to protect his Kingdom from the British in return for control of the Dahomey port of Cotonou.

King Behanzin (in an 1895 illustration above) assumed the Dahomey throne in 1889. Disputing French control of Cotonou,



(Illustration: 1895 depiction of a battle during the Second Franco-Dahomean War).

he provoked an attack by the French in 1890, resulting in the First Franco-Dahomean War, known in Benin as the First War of Resistance. Defeating Dahomey, the French enforced their claim on Cotonou. In an uneasy truce, both sides stockpiled arms and expanded their militaries

In 1892, King Behanzin sent a letter to the French threatening never-ending war if they attacked. In response, French General Alfred-Amédée Dodds marched on Dahomey with approximately 3,600 troops, initiating the Second War of Resistance. After 23 battles over the course of 7 weeks, the French forces decisively defeated Dahomey. Rather than have Abomey fall into French hands, King Behanzin set the town on fire and fled, though the French later captured and exiled him.

**The Colony of Dahomey:** In 1894, General Dodds placed Agoli-Agbo, a relative of King Behanzin, on the Dahomey throne. In return, Agoli-Agbo signed Dahomey's surrender to France, and on June 22, 1894, the French formally established the colony of Dahomey with its capital at Porto-Novo. French Dahomey was larger than the Kingdom of Dahomey, incorporating all the lands between Britain's colony to the east (modern-day Nigeria) and Germany's colony to the west (modern-day Togo).

Agoli-Agbo remained a puppet-king under the French until 1900, when French authorities exiled him and implemented direct colonial rule. The French never allowed another king to assume the Dahomean throne, and with the 1908 death of



Porto-Novo's king, all major thrones in Benin were vacant. Nevertheless, some rulers retained power and authority within their communities, and their descendants still identify as "princes" or "princesses" today. In

1909, France defined French Dahomey's boundaries with its neighboring colonies (modern-day Niger and Burkina Faso), establishing the borders of present-day Benin (Photo: Fon chiefs in Abomey in 1908).

### French West Africa

In 1904, France incorporated French Dahomey into French West Africa (*Afrique occidentale française* or OAF), a federation of French colonial territories ruled by a French

governor-general in Senegal. In the early 20th century, OAF was home to around 10 million people and encompassed some 1.8 million mi. of territory across modern-day Benin, Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Senegal.

The French believed that their colonies should be both self-sufficient and contribute to France's economic growth. Consequently, France tried to minimize its expenditures in Benin, maintaining a small colonial government and focusing primarily on the resources it could extract from the region. The colonial government became increasingly detached from local populations, and insufficient funds resulted in ineffective administration and governance.

By 1914, the French colonial administration was concentrated on developing the coastal region's agricultural sector, primarily palm oil production. French companies gained control of the plantations, and through the support of the colonial administration's forced labor policies, the sector grew to include cotton and peanut production. Although high taxes and low commodity prices frequently led to economic and social instability, the French pursued some economic development, building a deep-water port at Cotonou (Benin's de-facto seat of government today) (Photo: French Dahomey governor with local residents in 1932).



**Social Change:** French Dahomey encompassed not only the residents of the former Kingdom of Dahomey, but also the Yoruba in the South and East and the Muslim Bariba in the North (see p. 12 of *Political and Social Relations* and p. 7-8 of *Religion and Spirituality*). Early French policies assumed that over time colonial inhabitants would assimilate to French culture, become French citizens, integrate with France, and enjoy equal access to French institutions. In Senegal, its oldest colony, French authorities granted a few locals full citizenship,

but all other residents of the OAF became subjects of France with many obligations and few rights. While possible in theory, the achievement of citizenship by OAF residents was rare: by 1937 only 2,500 of some 15 million West Africans had acquired French citizenship.

Meanwhile, colonial authorities did little to improve living conditions beyond providing minimal health and education services (see p. 2 of *Learning and Knowledge*). More significant were the changes brought by French missionaries (see p. 4 of *Religion and Spirituality*) and the return of former slaves and their descendants from the Americas. Called **Brésiliens** (Brazilians), these returnees brought Afro-Brazilian and Caribbean culture with them, influencing cuisine (see p. 2

of *Sustenance and Health*), art, and architecture. Through the influence of the *Brésiliens* and missionaries, Christianity and Western-style education spread, particularly in the South. By the 1950s, French Dahomey was known in the OAF for its large numbers of intellectuals, authors, and professionals (Photo: Missionaries in Benin around 1910).



### Towards Independence

Gradually, French attitudes towards its colonies changed. First, Europeans' sense of cultural superiority began to diminish after the horrors of World War I. Second, the economic hardship of the Great Depression enhanced the importance of both raw materials from the colonies and the colonial markets as destinations for French manufactured goods. Consequently, the French were compelled to develop the skills and well-being of their colonial subjects.

Third, residents of French colonies played an important role in supporting the French resistance during World War II (WWII) and later in France's First Indochina War, further changing France's views of its colonial subjects. Among West Africans, these experiences were also transformative, with many benefitting from technical training received in the French army.

Even more significantly, these overseas experiences laid bare the exploitative realities of colonial rule, prompting growing opposition to colonialism across West Africa.

After WWII, local farmers benefitted from a growing economy, while an expanding education system created a small group of educated West Africans. As they gained knowledge and economic stability, West Africans sought enhanced political participation. Meanwhile, European colonial powers faced strong international pressure to transition their overseas territories toward independence.

In France's colonies, this process began with the French constitution of 1946, which granted French citizenship and representation in the French National Assembly to colonial subjects. Nevertheless, these changes fell short of West African aspirations, since the French granted only limited local government autonomy and parliamentary representation. Moreover, because of its weakened postwar economy, France was slow to implement development plans in the OAF, provoking further discontent (Photo: French Dahomey stamp from 1940).



In response, West Africans began forming nationalist organizations and political parties, such as the federation-wide African Democratic Rally (RDA). In 1956, France passed the *loi-cadre* (Reform Act) that transferred new powers of self-government to certain sub-regions of its colonies. Unsatisfied, the RDA continued to press for additional rights. Confronting unrest in other colonies and internal turmoil, France offered its West African colonies full self-government and association in a French Community that would handle international affairs. All the OAF colonies except Guinea accepted the arrangement. Instead, Guinea demanded and received full independence. Guinea's example emboldened the other colonies to make similar demands. On August 1, 1960, Dahomey achieved independence.

## Independent Dahomey

Post-independence, Dahomey's political landscape quickly fractured along ethnic and regional divisions. The rivalry of these factions, representing Porto-Novo, Abomey, and the North, prevented the formation of a national identity. In its first elections in December 1960, Dahomey elected northerner Hubert Maga as President, provoking resentment among residents of the South. Meanwhile, a weak economy spurred strikes and demonstrations. By 1963, the country was on the brink of civil war and secession by the North. The military stepped in and overthrew Maga, initiating almost a decade of coups and attempted coups, nine changes of government, and five constitutions. In an attempt to bring political stability to the country, three rival factions formed a Presidential Council, which held all legislative and executive power. Nevertheless, financial mismanagement and corruption continued, provoking strikes and demonstrations, especially among trade unionists, the youth, and the army's junior officers, who conducted two mutinies and another coup attempt in 1971-72.

## The People's Republic of Benin

In October 1972, Colonel (later General) Mathieu Kérékou seized power in Dahomey's 6th and last military coup. He quickly consolidated control, jailing some opposition political and military leaders, while forcing others into early retirement or self-exile. In 1974, Kérékou declared Dahomey a single-party, Marxist-Leninist state, then changed its name to the People's Republic of Benin a year later. As both the name of a nearby bay and an ancient empire in neighboring Nigeria, Benin was a meaningful yet neutral name intended to unite the country's ethnic groups (see p. 11-13 of *Political and*



*Social Relations*) (Illustration: Coat of arms of the People's Republic of Benin).

As a Marxist-Leninist state under Kérékou's People's Revolutionary Party of Benin (PRPB), Benin gained the financial backing of the Soviet Union (USSR), North Korea, and

Cuba, resulting in a decade of economic improvement and relative political stability. Besides nationalizing almost every economic sector, the government also limited personal freedoms, such as forcing Beninese to work on collective farms.

Yet Benin soon faced challenges on several fronts. Beginning in the 1970s, the economy began to contract due to drought, corruption, and mismanagement. By the early 1980s, many state companies were failing. Meanwhile, the nationalization of the education system had failed, causing teachers to leave the country in droves and leading to a serious deterioration of educational standards, access, and outcomes (see p. 2 of *Learning and Knowledge*).

In response, Kérékou pledged to restrict the state's role in the economy and seek investment from the West. Some economic alleviation occurred when Benin began exporting limited amounts of oil from its Semè offshore oil wells (see p. 2 of *Economics and Resources*). As the USSR faced its own internal instability in the late 1980s, it withdrew its financial support, causing economic and social conditions to continue to decline. When the government was unable to meet the payroll for the military and public-sector employees, anger and resentment across society grew.

His regime barely clinging to power in the face of constant demonstrations, Kérékou (pictured in 2006) agreed to host a National Convention (NC) in 1990 that would debate solutions to the country's economic woes. Open to all, even to exiled opposition groups, the NC quickly enlarged its mandate, developing a new constitution, while organizing multiparty elections and preparing for civilian rule. Under this pressure, and with economic incentives from international donors hanging in the balance, Kérékou accepted the inevitable. After 18 years in power, he denounced Marxism, dissolved the PRPB, and granted amnesty to political prisoners.



## The Republic of Benin

The NC's constitution established the renamed Republic of Benin as a multiparty democracy with a President limited to 2 5-year terms and a National Assembly, both elected through universal suffrage (see p. 4 of *Political and Social Relations*). Interim leadership fell to Kérékou and Fon leader Nicéphore Soglo.

As new political parties emerged, some 14 candidates sought the Presidency in the 1991 elections. While no candidate achieved a majority in the first round, opposition candidate Soglo won in the run-off, and Kérékou peacefully stepped down.

Newly-democratic Benin attracted significant investment from Western nations, while international donors funded infrastructure improvements. President Soglo also undertook economic reforms and implemented widely-respected fiscal policies. Nevertheless, Soglo's popularity declined as the public perceived little benefit from reforms.

**Kérékou Returns to Power:** In 1996 and 2001, Kérékou again challenged Soglo for the Presidency. Both times, Kérékou prevailed, earning him the nickname "The Chameleon" for his ability to change political colors to remain in power. During Kérékou's decade as President, the weak economy remained an issue of popular discontent, and workers went on strike several times. In 2003-04, corruption investigations dogged Kérékou's administration. Barred from seeking another term in 2006, Kérékou retired.



## Contemporary Benin

Independent candidate Thomas Boni Yayi (pictured at his 2006 inauguration) won the 2006 presidential election on a platform focused on addressing economic development and fighting corruption. The 2011 elections were postponed due to problems registering voters. Despite ongoing charges of irregularities, Yayi won reelection that year and continued his anti-corruption efforts.

During his two terms in office, Yayi reportedly survived several assassination attempts, notably a 2012 poisoning plot. The alleged mastermind of both that plot and an attempted coup the next year was President Yayi's former ally and so-called "King of Cotton" Patrice Talon (see p. 5 of *Economics and Resources*), who subsequently fled to France.

Although the source of the conflict between the two is unclear, it is likely found in the cotton industry. Specifically, Talon co-led Benin's private professional cotton association, the *Association Interprofessionnelle de Coton* (AIC or Inter-Professional Cotton Association) until 2012, when President Yayi removed the association's authority and placed the cotton industry under government control. This move likely cost Talon some lucrative government contracts. Publicly, though, Talon explained that the conflict arose from



Yayi's attempt to seek a third presidential term. After international mediation, President Yayi pardoned Talon in 2014, ending the conflict. Nevertheless, Talon's accusations disrupted President Yayi's efforts to combat corruption through constitutional reform, since supporters of Talon continued to believe Yayi sought to use the reform to enable a third term (Photo: President Yayi greets US President Bush in 2008).

In 2016, some 30 candidates ran for the Presidency, notably also Talon. Although he finished second in the first round, Talon prevailed in the run-off, winning some 65% of the vote largely on his promise to revive the stagnant cotton industry. Since taking office, Talon has removed control of the cotton industry from the government and returned it to the AIC. He has also established a commission to recommend reforms to fight corruption, although he lacks majority support in the legislature to pass such measures (see p. 5-6 of *Political and Social Relations*). He has also removed several local officials from office, reportedly due to mismanagement, although likely also due to their support for former President Yayi.

## Myth Overview

In contrast to history, which is supposed to be an objective record of the past based on verifiable facts, myths embody a culture's values and often explain the origins of humans and the natural world. Myths are important because they provide a sense of unique heritage and identity.

Many of Benin's myths and legends explore the origins of **collectivités** (lineages or communities) (see p. 13 of *Political and Social Relations*) and features of the natural world, while folktales typically describe heroic feats or teach moral lessons. Both types of stories often feature characters who perform magical and miraculous actions, such as **Vodun** (*Voudoun* spirits - see p. 2 of *Religion and Spirituality*). One well-known story relates how a *Vodun* spread the use of magic among humans.

**Legba, The Trickster:** One day, a *Vodun* named Legba fashioned a snake and instructed it to bite people as they gathered at the local market. Once bitten, the people looked for help, and Legba appeared to cure them. Grateful, the people paid Legba, helping him to make a good living.



A local man named Awa had the courage to ask Legba what creature was biting the people. Legba explained how he had used magic to create the snake and invited Awa to join him in his enterprise. Soon, Legba and Awa began making other magic charms used to either harm or cure.

Seeing this, Mawu, the creator goddess, grew angry. She made Legba invisible so that he no longer could appear human and must remain a *Vodun*. By contrast, Awa remained a man who eventually became chief of magic and shared his knowledge of both good and evil charms. That is how magic came to the people and spread across the land (Photo: Late 19th-century door from the palace of Dahomey King Glélé in Abomey).

## 2. POLITICAL AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

### Official Name

Republic of Benin

*République du Bénin* (French)

### Political Borders

Nigeria: 503 mi

Niger: 172 mi

Burkina Faso: 240 mi

Togo: 405 mi

Coastline: 75 mi

### Capital

Porto-Novo

### Demographics

Benin's population of about 12.9 million is growing at a rate of 3.4% per year. Like many African states, Benin is a young nation – about 66% of the population is under age 24 and less than 3% over age 65. About 48% of the population lives in urban areas, predominantly in the commercial center of Cotonou, the capital of Porto-Novo, and Abomey-Calavi. Most Beninese live in the South, while northern areas remain sparsely populated. Unlike other West African nations where inland farmers often move to the coast seeking



economic opportunities, rural Beninese farmers tend to relocate from densely populated coastal regions to Benin's less inhabited center to pursue agricultural enterprises.

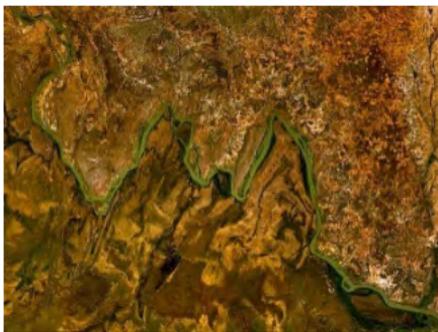
### Flag

Benin's flag consists of

two equal horizontal bands of gold (symbolizes wealth) and red (represents courage) and a vertical green band (denotes hope and revival).

## Geography

Located in West Africa, Benin borders Niger to the north, Nigeria to the east, the Bight of Benin in the Gulf of Guinea to the south, Togo to the west, and Burkina Faso to the northwest. One of Africa's smallest nations, Benin's total land area is about 42,700 sq mi, making it slightly smaller than Pennsylvania and about the same size as Cuba. Low-lying plains stretch along Benin's southern coastline, where large lagoons intermittently break sandy beaches and dunes. A fertile clay area extends just north of the coast, while most of the remaining interior is characterized by flat and at times undulating plains, forested savannas, and rolling hills. In the North, the Atacora Mountains extend west into neighboring Togo. Here, Benin's highest peak, Mont Sokbaro, rises to 2,159 ft (Photo: Bends in the Niger River give the W National Park its name).



Agricultural land consisting of arable areas, permanent crops, and pastures covers about one-third of the country, while tropical forests spread across an additional 40%. Africa's third longest river, The Niger, forms a large delta in Benin's Northeast. Other major rivers include the Pendjari, Mékrou, and Ouémé, among others. Benin's coast has shallow sandbanks with no natural harbors, making access difficult for larger vessels.

## Climate

Benin's climate and temperatures vary across two zones: semiarid in the North and subtropical in the South. Accordingly, northern areas tend to be hot and dry, while the South experiences a humid and rainy climate interspersed with hot and dry seasons July-September and November-March. Rainfall arrives along the coast beginning in late March and lasts through July. While rains eventually spread to northern regions, they remain heavier in the South. Along the coasts, temperatures average 80°F year-round. By contrast, in the North, temperatures often exceed 100°F, peaking in March-April. Hot,

dry, and dust-laden ***harmattan*** trade winds from the Sahara Desert blow north to south from December-March.

### Natural Hazards

Benin is vulnerable to several types of natural hazards, notably *harmattan* winds, floods, and periodic droughts. *Harmattan* winds intermittently blanket portions of Benin with a thick haze of fine red dust, severely limiting visibility, disrupting air and road traffic, and causing various respiratory health complications. Heavy rains occasionally cause flooding along Benin's southern floodplains. By contrast, a lack of significant rainfall in the North leads to drought, which in turn contributes to desertification.

### Environmental Issues

The clearing of land for cotton production, commercial logging, and fuel for cooking fires has contributed to rampant deforestation and loss of habitat for several of the world's



endangered species. Some farming techniques deplete soil quality and cause erosion, while desertification leads to shortages in potable water, particularly in northern rural areas. Further, just 8% of rural Beninese and 27% of urban residents have access to modern sanitation systems (see p. 6 of *Sustenance and Health*). As a result, improper waste disposal in rural regions creates water and soil pollution. In urban areas, air pollution caused by automobile emissions is an additional concern (Photo: A street in the western Beninese town of Bantè).

### Government

Benin is a presidential republic with a parliamentary government. The country divides into 12 administrative departments, each controlled by a governor and elected local council. Benin has had several constitutions, the 1st adopted in 1946, while Benin was still under French colonial administration (see p. 9 of *History and Myth*). The last constitution dates from 1990, when Benin transitioned to multiparty democracy (see p. 12 of *History and*

*Myth*). It separates power among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches and outlines the basic rights and freedoms of the Beninese people.

### Executive Branch

Executive power is vested in the President, who serves as chief-of-state, head-of-government, and commander-in-chief of Benin's Armed Forces. The President is directly elected by popular vote to serve up to two consecutive 5-year terms. Upon assuming office, the President appoints a Council of Ministers to help manage the nation's day-to-day affairs. The post of Prime Minister (PM) was frequently vacant over the last 25 years and then abolished in 2016. The office of the President guides and develops domestic and foreign policy but also retains considerable influence over the legislative and judicial branches. The current President, Patrice Talon, assumed office in 2016 (Illustration: Benin's coat of arms).



### Legislative Branch

Benin's legislature is a single chamber National Assembly (NA) composed of 83 members elected in multi-seat constituencies by proportional representation to serve 4-year terms. The NA controls all legislative powers, including amending the constitution, appointing positions in government, and approving declarations of war. The NA meets twice yearly for legislative sessions, though the President may request emergency sessions at any time throughout the year.

### Judicial Branch

Benin's legal system is a mix of formal law, which derives from the French legal system, and informal, customary law, which is based on traditional, unwritten practices of the indigenous population. The civil judiciary includes a Supreme Court, a Constitutional Court, a High Court of Justice, Courts of Appeal, and a system of lower, district courts. As the highest court, the Supreme Court is the final court of appeal for both civil and

criminal cases. With advice from the NA, the President appoints all Supreme Court justices to serve renewable 5-year terms.

Meanwhile, the High Court of Justice decides on cases of treason and other crimes committed by members of the government. Local, customary courts resolve disputes involving family, inheritance, and property. In 2018, a member of Benin's judiciary, Judge Reine Alapini-Gansou, joined the International Criminal Court, an 18-member international tribunal based in The Hague, Netherlands that prosecutes cases of genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity.

### Political Climate

While Benin successfully transitioned from a dictatorship to a multi-party democracy in the 1990s (see p. 11-12 of *History and Myth*), its political environment over the last several decades has been characterized by infighting, political fragmentation, and occasional violence. New political parties frequently form around a prominent political figure or along ethnic and regional lines but tend to be ideologically divided, underfunded, and lack political influence outside of their regional bases. Although political parties often form alliances to gain wider support among the Beninese, these coalitions tend to be weak, disagree on political platforms, and dissolve frequently.



Prior to the 2019 parliamentary election, Benin had over 30 active political parties. However, over 20 parties merged and created the Progressive Union. Cory forces for an Emerging Benin, led by Thomas Boni Yayi (pictured, with former US President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama) (see p. 12-13 of *History and Myth*), called for unity amongst opposition parties, but several opposition parties appeared set to run alone. Only two blocks were set to participate in the elections, the Republican Bloc and the Progressive Union, both of which had tied to President Patrice Talon. The Progressive Union now holds 47 seats in the NA with the Bloc Republican party holding 36.

A wealthy businessman with a history marred by political scandal (see p. 13 of *History and Myth*), President Talon secured an unexpected victory in the 2016 Presidential election after campaigning to reduce unemployment and improve Benin's dilapidated health and education infrastructure. Since assuming office, President Talon has attempted to revamp the stagnant economy and improve residents' access to healthcare and education services through numerous reforms.



Progress, however, has been slow. With public confidence in the government eroding and tensions rising, 2018 saw a series of public sector strikes and anti-government demonstrations, primarily orchestrated by students and health and education sector employees (Photo: Rural Beninese women).

Despite recent friction, Benin has maintained more than two decades of relatively peaceful democratic governance and remains one of Africa's most stable nations. The government generally respects freedom of assembly, expression, and press (see p. 3-4 of *Technology and Materials*), and as a result, Beninese enjoy a wide range of civil liberties. Although voters

often turn out in low numbers and opposition groups at times report voting irregularities, international observers deem elections generally free and fair. Nevertheless, like many fledgling democracies, Benin has struggled to curb rampant corruption



across all levels of government. Despite efforts by both former President Yayi's and current President Talon's administrations, corruption continues to obstruct public services and occasionally threatens to disrupt the democratic process (Photo: Beninese schoolchildren).

## Defense

The Beninese Armed Forces (BAF) are a small, unified military force consisting of ground, maritime, and air branches with a joint strength of 7,250 active duty troops plus a paramilitary force. The BAF are primarily charged with maintaining internal



security and reinforcing Benin's borders to reduce illicit trafficking and other foreign threats. Recently, emerging threats from radical Islamist groups operating in the region (see "Security Issues" below) have prompted the BAF to improve

domestic counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism capabilities through training and capital investment (Photo: A member of the Beninese military participates in US-led counter-terrorism training as part of Benin's broader efforts to strengthen its borders and curtail illegal cross-border movement).

**Army:** By far the largest of the 3 military branches, the Beninese Army is a force of 6,500 active-duty troops consisting of 12 maneuver battalions and squadrons (including armored, light, and air maneuver), 4 combat support battalions, and 2 combat service support battalions.

**Navy:** The Beninese Navy consists of 500 active-duty personnel equipped with 5 patrol and coastal combatants. Maritime security has recently emerged as a priority for the BAF. As a result, the Navy has attempted to bolster its current fleet and anti-piracy capabilities by acquiring additional high-speed craft.

**Air Force:** The smallest of the 3 branches, the Beninese Air Force consists of 250 active-duty personnel and is equipped with 6 aircraft and 5 helicopters.

**Paramilitary:** The Beninese Paramilitary divides into 4,800 active-duty Gendarmerie members organized into 4 maneuver units.

# Beninese Air Force Rank Insignia



Airman



Airman 1st Class



Senior Airman



Staff Sergeant



Technical Sergeant



Master Sergeant



Chief Master Sergeant



Jr Warrant Officer



Warrant Officer



Chief Warrant Officer



Officer Candidate



2nd Lieutenant



1st Lieutenant



Captain



Major



Lt Colonel



Colonel

## Security Issues

Benin's security environment is largely dominated by increased concern over Islamist extremist groups in the region.

**Islamist Groups:** While Benin remains free of Islamist violence as of 2019, several large terrorist organizations operate just beyond its borders. One of Benin's most pressing threats is Boko Haram, a particularly violent Islamist insurgent movement based in neighboring Nigeria that seeks to purge the region of Western influence. Since emerging in the 1990s, Boko Haram has expanded operations to parts of Chad, Niger, and Cameroon, where it regularly conducts brutal terrorist attacks. Since 2009, Boko Haram has destroyed entire villages, killed over 20,000 people, and displaced over 2.3 million others across the Lake Chad region.

In 2015, Boko Haram publicly pledged its allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS, also known as Daesh, ISIL, and IS), a militant Islamist group currently controlling large swaths of territory in Iraq and Syria. This new alliance with ISIS fuels the concern that Boko Haram may gain more regional influence, notably in Benin. Seeking to deter potential activities of Boko Haram and other Islamist groups, Benin has sought to strengthen its borders through various investments into the BAF.

In 2017, for example, Benin's army and national police participated in separate bilateral military exercises with US and French forces specifically designed to fortify Benin's border protection



capabilities (Photo: Beninese sailors and US Marines conduct NCO development and general maintenance management training at naval headquarters Cotonou, Benin).

## Foreign Relations

Benin's aims to diversify and strengthen its economy, ensure the safety of its borders, and limit the influence of regional Islamist militant groups shape its foreign relations. As a result, Benin cultivates friendly relations with neighboring countries,

participates in international peacekeeping missions, and actively promotes democracy, peace, and stability within the region. Benin is also a member of global institutions like the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and the World Trade Organization. Regionally, Benin participates in the African Union and the Economic Community of West African States.

**Regional Security Cooperation:** Benin participates in the Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF), a five-country counter-terrorism force (with Chad, Cameroon, Niger, and Nigeria) established in 2015 to fight common security concerns such as Boko Haram and other Islamist militant groups. The main objectives of the MNJTF are to deny terrorists the ability to move across borders, reduce the severity of incursions, assist with the return of internally displaced people, promote knowledge-sharing among member nations, and develop regional military interoperability.

Since 2015, the MNJTF's force of some 10,000 African troops has reversed some of Boko Haram's territorial advances around the Lake Chad region, destroyed over 32 terrorist camps, and freed more than 20,000 hostages. Since joining the organization in late 2015, Benin has deployed 750 troops to participate in MNJTF operations.



### **Relations with the US:**

While the US and Benin first established diplomatic ties in 1960 upon Benin's independence from France, political turmoil in the 1960s followed by nearly two decades of communist rule stifled bilateral relations.

Political, economic, and military ties between the two nations strengthened significantly in the 1990s, when Benin transitioned to multiparty democracy. Today, the US supports Benin's continued efforts to liberalize and diversify its economy, strengthen its democratic institutions, and expand the role of civil society and other socio-economic agencies (Photo: Humanitarian aid arrives in Benin from the US).

The US also provides Benin substantial military support, both through financial contributions and military training. Seeking to enhance Benin's interoperability with US forces and increase regional security, the US primarily focuses on strengthening the BAF's counter-terrorism and internal security capabilities. In addition to military support, the US provides Benin with bilateral assistance to improve its healthcare system, strengthen civil society and human rights institutions, develop physical infrastructure, reduce corruption, and support sustainable agriculture and food security programs, among numerous other initiatives.

## Ethnic Groups

Benin is home to over 50 ethnic groups, many of which also inhabit its neighbors – Togo, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, and Niger – and other regional countries such as Chad. Many of Benin's residents trace their roots to 1 or more primary ethnic groups that migrated and settled in the region centuries ago (see p. 1-2 of *History and Myth*). For example, the Yoruba people spread from the East in the 12th century, over time forming the Nagot, Tchabe and Idaatcha ethnic groups. Meanwhile, the Gun, who today live around the southern capital city of Porto-Novo, result from intermarriage between the Yoruba and Aja, who migrated from southeastern Togo and notably established the Kingdom of Dahomey in the 18th century (see p. 3 in *History and Myth*) (Photo: A Beninese child).



**Fon:** The Fon and related groups constitute Benin's largest ethnic grouping, composing over 38% of the population. Like the Gun, the Fon trace their roots to the Aja (see p. 1 of *History and Myth*). The Fon are primarily located in southern regions, where they comprise the dominant ethnic group. In recent years, many Fon have spread across the country, and the Fon language is the most widely used local tongue (see p. 2 of *Language and Communication*).

**Aja:** Known as the founders of the Kingdom of Dahomey, the Aja today compose over 15% of Benin's population.

**Yoruba:** Comprising approximately 12% of Benin's population, the Yoruba ethnic group spread throughout southwestern Nigeria and into the territory of modern Benin over 1000 years ago. In the 17th century, the Yoruba formed the powerful Kingdom of Oyo based in modern-day Nigeria, which was a rival to the Kingdom of Dahomey (see p. 3 of *History and Myth*). Today, most of Benin's Yoruba live East along the border with Nigeria.

**Bariba:** Located primarily in Benin's Northeast, the Bariba and related groups compose nearly 10% of the population. Renowned horsemen, the Muslim Bariba are primarily cattle herders whose ancestors moved into the region from northern Nigeria several hundred years ago (see p. 2 of *History and Myth*). The Bariba traditionally have a stratified society and employ Fulani herdsman (see below).



**Dendi:** The Dendi are a relatively small ethnic group, comprising about 3% of the population. They migrated from Mali in the 16th century and today constitute the dominant ethnic group in Benin's sparsely populated North. Originally Muslim farmers, the Dendi are now primarily traders. Like the Bariba, the Dendi often employ Fulani to care for their cattle (Photo: Beninese villagers).

**Fulani:** Fulani and related groups compose over 8% of Benin's population. Locally known as the **Peul**, Fulani are nomadic herders who live across northern and central Africa, including the northernmost regions of Benin. Most Fulani are Muslim, and many serve in Benin's armed forces. The Fulani are known for their distinctive, bright clothing.

**Brésiliens:** Descendants of former slaves who returned from Brazil and the Caribbean in the 19th century (see p. 8 of *History and Myth*), Brésiliens generally have distinctive Portuguese names, are typically well educated, and live in the coastal areas.

Prominent traders during French colonial rule, Brésiliens lost much of their power and influence after Benin's independence, and many eventually emigrated to France.

**Other Groups:** Other notable groups include the Ottomari (also known as Somba or Bétammaribé) and Yoa-Lopka. Benin is also home to other ethnic groups from West Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, most of them residing in Cotonou and other large cities.

## Social Relations

Benin is culturally diverse, home to numerous ethnic groups, each with its own language, customs, and traditions. Relations among the groups are generally peaceful and harmonious. Nevertheless, Benin experiences some societal divisions that primarily manifest in political rivalries between ethnic groups from the North and South (see p. 10 of *History and Myth*). For example, geographically isolated, north-dwelling groups such as the Bariba tend to compete for political power with the Fon and other groups living along the densely populated southern coasts. Disagreements often stem from the comparative underdevelopment of the North's education, health, and economic infrastructure. Moreover, some inter-ethnic conflicts are rooted in historical events. The Mahi, for example, maintain some animosity towards the Fon, who enslaved many of the Mahi people when they ruled the Kingdom of Dahomey (see p. 2-4 of *History and Myth*) (Photo: A Beninese Slave Trade Memorial at Ouidah).



Although Benin's ethnic groups have their own distinctive social systems, based on their customs and beliefs, several elements are common across groups. The family is traditionally the prime social unit for most Beninese, with some ethnic groups also identifying with a **collectivité** (lineage or community) formed by several families. For other Beninese, the village is the basic social unit, often organized around a patrilineal line (descends through the male bloodline) with a local village king as leader.

## 3. RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

### Overview

According to a 2013 census, about 49% of Beninese are Christian and about 28% Muslim. Some 12% follow **Voudoun**, a traditional belief system (see below), while the remainder adhere to other traditional beliefs and practices or claim no religious affiliation. Although they identify as Christian or Muslim, many Beninese also incorporate elements of or other traditional religions into their devotional practices (Photo: Voudun Python Temple in Ouidah).



Benin's constitution establishes a secular state with no national religion. It also guarantees freedom for Beninese to worship and practice according to their personal beliefs if those activities do not infringe upon public order.

The law prohibits religious discrimination and allows Beninese police and other security forces to intervene in inter-religious conflicts as a neutral party. To practice freely, all religious groups must register with the government. Thereafter, religious organizations may perform services in public, establish private schools, and receive government funding, among other privileges. Generally, relations among Benin's numerous religious groups are marked by mutual tolerance and cooperation.

### **Voudoun and Other Traditional Beliefs**

Before the introduction of Christianity and Islam, Beninese followed a variety of traditional religious beliefs and practices, many of which continue to feature prominently in modern Beninese society. Of these, *Voudoun* (also known as **Vodun** or **Voodoo**) is the most prevalent, practiced in different forms by some members of the Fon and Yoruba ethnic groups (see p. 11-12 of *Political and Social Relations*).

*Voudoun* is an animist religion, in which followers believe that the spirit of life or consciousness resides in all objects, both animate and inanimate. Animism promotes the notion that all natural objects – for example, mountains, trees, and animals – are sacred, and this conviction establishes a close connection between *Voudoun* followers and their environment.

*Voudoun* also recognizes a supreme being, an all-powerful god who created the world. Known as **Mahu**, **Dada-Segbo**, **Semedo**, or **Gbedoto** among the Fon and **Olorun** or **Olodumare** among the Yoruba, the creator god is good, merciful, and unknowable. Because the supreme-being does not intervene in daily life, practitioners rarely make appeals directly to him/her. Instead, they petition numerous lesser divinities, or **Vodun** among the Fon and **Orisha** among the Yoruba, through prayer and sacrifice. Viewing these spirits as protectors of the natural world, followers hold special ceremonies or perform certain rites at temples and shrines to encourage spirits to bring rain, good harvests and health, financial success, and other blessings.

*Voudoun* followers also believe that the spirits of their ancestors intervene in daily life to guide or obstruct human behavior. As a result, funerals are particularly important events,



often marked by elaborate rituals that help the deceased transition into the afterlife (see p. 7 of *Family and Kinship*). Other important ritual ceremonies mark birth and death, celebrate initiation, promote healing, and cast out evil spirits. Celebrants

typically offer food and drink to the ancestor and other spirits during the ceremonies, which also include chanting and dancing (pictured) while wearing elaborate, colorful costumes.

Trained priests or priestesses are responsible for maintaining good relations with the spirit world in their communities and

lead important rituals. To become a *Voudoun* priest or priestess, students attend religious schools (also called “convents”), where they often endure physically and mentally taxing curricula comprised of lessons and traditions transmitted through the generations. Some international observers have raised concerns that such *Voudoun* schools, whose activities are largely shrouded in secrecy, occasionally abduct or forcibly enroll their students, prevent members from leaving, or forbid followers to convert from the religion.



Christian or Muslim Beninese oftentimes integrate particular aspects of *Voudoun* into their devotional practices. For example, following a death, families may perform both a *Voudoun* ritual and a Christian or Muslim funeral (see p. 7 of *Family and Kinship*). Moreover, Beninese experiencing misfortune or seeking information about their destiny or future may consult diviners (called **bokono** by the Fon and **babalao** by the Yoruba), who are ritual specialists having the ability to communicate with spirits, answer questions, and offer guidance to those afflicted by hardships. Beninese occasionally accuse one another, even babies, of witchcraft or practicing evil, harmful magic (**aze**). Such an accusation can result in significant mistreatment of the accused (see p. 4 of *Family and Kinship*) (Photo: Animal skulls, which serve as *Voudoun* talismans, on display in Benin).

During Benin’s communist era (see p. 10-11 of *History and Myth*), the government imposed an atheistic worldview which rejected religion. While it consequently limited the activities of all religious groups, the state mounted a particularly aggressive campaign against traditional religious communities, destroying many sacred trees, shrines, and other important *Voudoun* sites. Upon emerging from communism (see p. 12 of *History and Myth*), the government reinstated freedom of religion, notably establishing a national holiday to celebrate *Voudoun* and other indigenous traditions.

## Christianity

Although Christianity first arrived in Benin in the early 17th century, resistance from Beninese and death from disease among the missionary population prevented the new religion from taking root initially.

Efforts to Christianize the region continued to stall until 1860, when Father Francois Borghero, an Italian-born missionary, established the first successful Roman Catholic mission along Benin's coast. Over the following decades, French Catholic missionaries expanded their networks, opening schools (see p. 1-2 of *Learning and Knowledge*) and offering medical services to the Beninese. With such services largely unavailable prior to their arrival, Christian missions played a dominant role in the

development of Beninese society during the colonial era (see p. 6-9 of *History and Myth*).



Gradually, Christianity spread to northern regions, and by 1965, an estimated 45% of Beninese children who attended school were

enrolled in Catholic institutions. In 1974, the Catholic archdiocese of Cotonou comprised 450 missionary schools staffed by over 2,500 educators. Although Benin's government later formally integrated all Catholic schools into the state educational network, Catholic missions and churches today continue to serve as hubs of health, education, and social services (Photo: The Notre-Dame d'Arigbo basilica in Dassa, in central Benin).

## Islam

### Origins of Islam

Muhammad, who Muslims consider God's final Prophet, was born in Mecca in 570 in what is today Saudi Arabia. Muslims believe that while Muhammad was meditating in the desert, the Archangel Gabriel visited him over a 23-year period, revealing the Qur'an, or "Holy Book," to guide their everyday lives and shape their values.

## Meaning of Islam

Islam is a way of life to its adherents. The term Islam literally means submission to the will of God, and a Muslim is “a person who submits to God.”

## Muslim Sects

Islam is divided into two sects: Sunni and Shi'a. Sunnis are distinguished by their belief that the leader (*Caliph*) of the Muslim community (*Ummah*) should be elected. Conversely, Shi'a Muslims believe the religious leader should be a direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad (Photo: Late 7th century Arabian Qur'an).



## Five Pillars of Islam

There are 5 basic principles of the Islamic faith.

- **Profession of Faith (*Shahada*):** “There is no god but God, and Muhammad is His Messenger.”
- **Prayer (*Salat*):** Pray 5 times a day while facing the Ka’aba in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. The Ka’aba is considered the center of the Muslim world and a unifying focal point for Islamic worship.
- **Charity (*Zakat*):** Donate a percentage of one’s income to the poor or needy.
- **Fasting (*Sawm*):** Abstain from food, drink, and sexual relations from sunrise to sunset during the holy month of Ramadan.
- **Pilgrimage to Mecca (*The Hajj*):** Perform the pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia once in a lifetime.

## Shared Perspectives

Many Islamic tenets parallel those of Judaism and Christianity. In fact, Muslims consider Christians and Jews “people of the Book,” referring to biblical scriptures, because they also believe in one God.

**Abraham:** All 3 faiths trace their lineage to Abraham, known as *Ibrahim* in Islam. However, Christians and Jews trace their descent to Abraham, his wife Sarah, and their son Isaac; while Muslims trace theirs to Abraham and his Egyptian concubine, Hagar, and their son Ishmael.

**Scriptures:** Much of the content of the Qur'an is similar to teachings and stories found in the Christian Bible's Old and New Testaments, and Muslims view Islam as a completion of previous revelations to Jewish and Christian prophets. However, Muslims believe Jews and Christians altered God's word and that Muhammad received the true revelation of God.

**Jesus:** The 3 religions differ significantly in their understanding of the role of Jesus. While Christians consider him the divine Messiah who fulfills Jewish Scriptures, Jews are still waiting for the Messiah to come. Muslims recognize Jesus as a prophet but do not acknowledge his divinity or the Christian Trinity.



**View of Death:** Muslims believe that God determines the time of death and birth. While people grieve the loss of family members or friends, they do not view death as a negative event, as Muslims believe that a person who lived a good life goes on to live in Heaven (Photo: US Marine at the Ka'aba in 2012).

### Concept of Jihad

The concept of jihad, or inner striving, is a fundamental element within Islam. Traditionally, it is the principled and moral pursuit of God's command to lead a virtuous life. It should not be confused with the publicized violence often associated with jihad. Most Muslims are strongly opposed to terrorism and consider it contrary to Islamic beliefs.

### Ramadan

Observed during the 9th month of the Islamic lunar calendar (see p. 2 of *Time and Space*), Ramadan is a month-long time for inner reflection, self-control, and focus on God. During this

time, Muslims who are physically able fast from dawn to sunset. Many Muslims believe that denying their hunger helps them to learn self-control, appreciate the difficulties of the poor, and gain spiritual renewal – by fasting, a Muslim learns to appreciate the good in life. Beninese Muslims typically break their daily fast at sunset with a meal known as *iftar*. Ramadan includes several holidays:

- **Lailat al-Qadr:** This “Night of Power” marks Muhammad’s receipt of the first verses of the Qur’an.
- **Eid al-Fitr:** Also called **Korité** in Benin, this “Festival of Fast-Breaking” celebrates Ramadan’s end and is a national holiday in Benin.

Another important holiday is celebrated when the Hajj ends, about 70 days following the end of Ramadan.

- **Eid al-Adha:** Also known as **Tabaski** in Benin, this “Festival of Sacrifice” commemorates Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son, Ishmael (or Isaac, according to Christians), as proof of his loyalty to God. It is also a national holiday.

### The Arrival of Islam in Benin

Islam first penetrated the region

as Muslim Arab traders traveled across the Sahara into northern Benin as early as the 9th century. Islam’s initial impact was minimal, but over time, many inhabitants of northern trading towns adopted the new religion. Islam had become popular among the elite due to its association with the



studies of sciences, geography, poetry, and governance. The spread of Islam in Benin has been peaceful but contained largely to Beninese living in the North, although some southern urban areas also have large Muslim communities (Photo: A group of Beninese women).

## Religion Today

Most Beninese are deeply spiritual, with Christian, Islamic, and traditional beliefs permeating daily life. Benin observes Christian, Muslim, and *Voudoun* celebrations as national holidays, with religious events serving as popular social occasions.

### Islam

Nearly all Beninese Muslims adhere to the Maliki school of Sunni Islam, a generally tolerant school of thought that emphasizes community consensus and the primacy of the Qur'an over later Islamic teachings. Benin is also home to a small population of Shi'a Muslims who are primarily non-citizens. There is also a growing presence of the Ahmadiyya Muslims, with their distinctive white/green painted signs/mosques. Originating in colonial India, the Ahmadiyya movement is spreading across West Africa. Most Muslims live in Benin's North. Muslim typically children attend Qur'anic schools, either in addition to or instead of attending public schools, where they learn the practices and morals of Islam and memorize Qur'anic verses in Arabic.

### Christianity

Some 26% of Beninese identify as Roman Catholic, while about 14% as Protestant, including Celestial Christians (known for their all-white Sunday attire), Methodists, Baptists, Pentecostals, and others. The remainder of Benin's



Christian population divides among The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, and followers of the Family Federation of World Peace and Unification (Unification Church). Concentrating in southern regions, Benin's Christian churches serve as primary sources of social, medical, and educational services for their members (Photo: Cathedral at Ouidah).

## Religion and Politics

Benin generally remains free of religious conflict and interfaith tensions, although bouts of violence among various groups occur on occasion. In 2016, for example, a family dispute over the rightful control of a mosque in the central village of Semere escalated to violence, compelling Beninese security forces to intervene and consequently resulting in five deaths and multiple injuries. Additionally, a group of *Voudoun* followers vandalized a Catholic prayer center in the Southeast, claiming the Christian group had intentionally interfered with a *Voudoun* ritual. While the dispute eventually was resolved peacefully, initial tensions necessitated the presence of security forces (Photo: A US health volunteer talks with Beninese women as they prepare lunch).



The Beninese government actively works to promote religious tolerance. Government officials regularly attend religious ceremonies organized by various groups, often broadcasting the events over state-owned television. In a notable example, President Talon coordinated and mediated the peaceful resolution of a 19-year property feud between two factions of the Protestant Methodist Church of Benin.

Moreover, the government participates in an ongoing “African Initiative on Education for Peace and Development through Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue,” which compels politicians and local religious leaders to coordinate on projects that promote religious tolerance. Finally, every year Beninese celebrate “Ecumenical Day,” whereby religious leaders attend a summit to publicly promote interfaith dialogue and bridge any divides among Benin’s religious communities (Photo: Beninese celebrate the opening of a health clinic in Pehunco, a town in northern Benin).



## 4. FAMILY AND KINSHIP

### Overview

The large extended family is the center of Beninese life, whereby often serve as a mutual support network. While there are some differences among ethnic and religious groups, all Beninese celebrate rituals to mark important personal milestones.

### Residence

Housing structures vary depending on location, family composition, and income. While most urban dwellers have access to electricity and clean drinking water, just 27% have modern sanitation systems (see p. 3 of *Political and Social Relations*). Further, few rural communities have any of the basic necessities – electricity, running water, or sanitation (see p. 6 of *Sustenance and Health*). Both urban and rural Beninese typically live in walled compounds housing multiple families who share kitchen and bathroom facilities. Furnishings in both rural and urban homes are typically sparse, consisting of sleeping mats or mattresses, a few stools or chairs, and a table.

**Rural:** Some 52% of Beninese live in rural areas, where extended families typically share a walled or fenced compound of several one to 3-room dwellings



constructed of mud brick with thatched or tin roofs. A central courtyard features a shared kitchen, eating space, water pump or well, and animal pen. An enclosed latrine is located some distance from the compound, while a walled showering area is attached to a dwelling. Home styles vary by ethnic group. For example, the Somba people prefer 2-story houses without windows, while the Bétammaribé construct clay huts with thatched roofs called **tatas** (Photo: Outdoor cooking facilities in a compound in Savalou, in central Benin).

**Urban:** Benin has experienced rapid urbanization in recent decades. In 1960, just 9% of the population lived in urban areas, yet by 2020, that proportion had risen to 48%. In contrast to their rural counterparts, urban compounds typically house several unrelated nuclear families (two parents and their children) in cement brick dwellings. Residents typically rent their own dwelling, while sharing kitchen and bathroom space with the other compound residents. Benin's wealthier urban-dwellers tend to live in apartment buildings or Western-style single-family homes.

### Family Structure

Traditionally, multiple generations lived in close proximity. This pattern is still common in rural areas, though many urban Beninese live as nuclear families, sometimes far



from their extended families. Men were traditionally the primary breadwinners, while the women were responsible for the majority of domestic tasks, childcare, and assist with agricultural chores (see p. 1 of *Sex and Gender*) (Photo: A US Navy pediatrician speaks with a Beninese family).

Extended families provide a financial and emotional support network. Tradition dictates that a Beninese's success and material gains also belong to his larger family unit. However, as nuclear families become more prominent in urban areas, the financial and social expectations associated with extended family relationships are becoming less demanding.

**Polygyny:** This term refers to the practice of a man having multiple wives simultaneously, which is relatively common in Benin. Historically, multiple wives symbolized a man's masculinity, wealth, and social status. The additional labor wives provided also likely gave the family an economic advantage in a subsistence economy (see p. 4 of *Economics and Resources*). Although exact statistics for Benin are unavailable, experts estimate that 30%-50% of West Africans today live in polygynous relationships. While the rate is significantly lower among the more educated and urban

dwellers, polygynists in Benin include people of all faiths (see p. 1 of *Religion and Spirituality*).

Even though a Beninese man may take multiple wives, a 2004 law only recognizes his first wife as his lawful spouse. For the most part, the law becomes significant primarily upon a husband's death, when only the lawful wife has a right to inherit her husband's property. Nevertheless, all the man's children may also inherit, regardless of the legal status of their mothers.



### Children

Families are typically large, and children assume household responsibilities from a young age. Tasks for girls include cooking, caring for younger family members,

and fetching firewood and water. Boys typically perform farm chores or work in the family business. Families also emphasize respect for authority and older family members beginning early in childhood. Upon adulthood this respect transforms into responsibility for the physical and financial support of aging parents (Photo: A Beninese child).

Some parents suffering from extreme poverty (see p. 3 of *Economics and Resources*), allow their children under the legal age of 14 to work in agriculture, mines, or quarries or as street vendors and domestic servants to earn money for the family. These children often labor in difficult conditions for little pay. In a practice called **vidomegon**, rural parents send their children to live with relatives or friends in the city to perform domestic labor in return for receiving an education. Host families sometimes break the agreement, forcing the children to work long hours without adequate food in conditions making them vulnerable to physical or sexual abuse.

### Rites of Passage

Beninese observe rites-of-passage ceremonies to mark the various stages of life such as birth, puberty, marriage, and death. While rituals may vary considerably across ethnic and

religious heritage, they are usually held in the extended family's so-called ceremony house.

**Birth:** A birth is a joyous occasion, and Beninese view children as a sign of vitality, good fortune, and wealth. New parents typically share news of a pregnancy enthusiastically and widely. Historically, women gave birth at home, after which the baby's umbilical cord was placed in a pot and buried. Among



Beninese who follow **Voudoun** (see p. 1-3 of *Religion and Spirituality*), families host a special **agabasa-yiyi** ceremony soon after a birth to welcome the child into the community. During the ceremony, a diviner (ritual specialist – see p. 3 of *Religion and Spirituality*) assigns a **joto**, an ancestral protector and associated **du**, an individualized set of rules that govern and direct the life of the child. An important rite-of-passage, the **agabasa-yiyi** ceremony ties the newborn to family, ancestors, and

community, while also guiding the child away from harmful influences throughout his life. Beninese consider those without a **joto** as disconnected from the community and may ostracize them (Photo: A Beninese woman carries her baby while balancing a load on her head).

Despite widespread campaigns against the practice, infanticide occasionally occurs, primarily in Benin's North. The practice stems from traditional beliefs regarding witchcraft (see p. 3 of *Religion and Spirituality*), whereby certain characteristics and circumstances indicate that a baby is a **biiyodo** or witch. These include physical defects or abnormalities, premature or breech birth, and death of the mother during birth, among others. To discourage infanticide in these situations, some organizations perform rituals designed to dispel the power of babies deemed witches without harming them.

**Naming:** While specific traditions vary across ethnic groups, Beninese typically observe certain naming rituals. According to Bariba custom, a child is simply referred to by their gender and birth order, such as “second daughter/son,” until their 4th

birthday when the child receives a unique name. Among the Fon, a baby's name reflects its birth circumstances or physical characteristics (see p. 4 of *Language and Communication*). By contrast, Yoruba babies typically have two naming ceremonies, one for each side of the family. In addition to local language names, some families also give their children a Christian or Muslim name.

**Coming-of-Age:** Some Beninese ethnic groups mark the transition from adolescence to adulthood around age 18-20. For example, Muslim Beninese often celebrate a young adult's completion of their Qur'anic studies with a party. Male circumcision at age 18 is also an important rite of passage among some groups.



### **Dating and Marriage**

Boys and girls typically interact from a young age and mix at school, markets, or work. Casual dating is common, and couples often socialize at family events and ceremonies, dances, or dinners. Young people usually date multiple partners before deciding to marry (Photo: Beninese learn about their rights in a US-sponsored program).

While arranged marriages were common in the past, they are relatively rare today except in some rural northern regions. Instead, most Beninese make their own romantic matches without significant input from their families, typically marrying in their late 20s. Although child marriage (marriage before age 18) is illegal, an adolescent as young as 14 may marry legally with parental permission and a judge's consent. As of 2018, 31% of Beninese women aged 20-24 had married before age 18, and in some cases were forced marriages (see p. 3 of *Sex and Gender*). Couples must marry in a civil ceremony or register with the government to receive legal recognition of their union. Some Beninese, notably Muslims, ignore this requirement and opt only for religious ceremonies.

**Bridewealth:** Refers to a sum paid by the groom's family to the bride's as compensation for the loss of her presence and

labor. Upon the arrangement of a union, the families must negotiate a mutually-agreeable bridewealth before wedding preparations take place. It consists of cash, jewelry, or other valuable items and traditionally is negotiated by female elders from the bride's family, indicating their approval of the planned union of the two families. Because the bridewealth can be substantial, some couples must spend years saving for it and have to postpone their wedding. In the interim, some choose to live together and start a family.

Some groups enjoy other pre-wedding customs. For example, Yoruba couples typically hold an elaborate engagement ceremony, whereby representatives for the bride's and groom's families, called the **olopa idura** (groom's family) and **olopa ijoko** (bride's family), formally exchange a letter requesting the bride's hand in marriage. Traditional food and dancing follow (Photo: Rural Beninese marriage celebration).



**Weddings:** While specific practices vary by ethnic group, region, and religion, weddings are generally joyous events celebrated by the community. Couples

often tailor their wedding celebrations to their individual preferences for traditional, Christian or Muslim, and civil events. During the ceremony, some Beninese choose to wear traditional clothing (see p. 1 of *Aesthetics and Recreation*), while others wear Western-style white dresses and dark suits. Others incorporate both Western and traditional music and dress into their nuptials.

While Christian weddings are typically performed by a minister and occur in a church, Muslims usually gather at the home of an elder from the bride's family. The highlight of the Muslim ceremony occurs when the bride fetches the groom from his seat among his family to join her on a sofa at the front of the room. Later, the groom presents the bride with an envelope containing the bridewealth. After she verbally accepts the offer, the couple signs an Islamic marriage contract.

Some Beninese incorporate elements of *Voudoun* or other traditional beliefs (see p. 1 of *Religion and Spirituality*) into their wedding. For example, the couple may consult a *fâ* (oracle) to determine what types of sacrifices to hold during the ceremony. During the wedding, the couple typically presents offerings before the groom's family *Voudoun* shrine, while reciting special prayers. Regardless of tradition, family and friends gather after the ceremonies for celebrations that sometimes extend for several days.

**Divorce:** Divorce is common and has little if any stigma associated with it. Most Beninese remarry following divorce.

### Death

In general, Beninese view a funeral as a time to reflect on the deceased and celebrate his reunification with the ancestors (see p. 2 of *Religion and Spirituality*). Funerals are often elaborate events, consisting of days of feasting, music, and dance, sometimes requiring the family to acquire loans or sell possessions to finance the festivities. Funerals are sometimes delayed so the family can gather the necessary funds or allow time for family and friends living at a distance to make travel arrangements (Photo: Grand Mosque at Porto Novo).



Besides celebrations, funerals typically also include a parade and religious service. After the burial, mourners gather at the family's ceremony house or at the home of the deceased. Beninese also typically commemorate the anniversary of a loved one's death by gathering again for shared meals and dancing. In line with Islamic tradition, Muslim Beninese bury their loved ones as soon as possible after death, usually within 24 hours. The deceased's body is washed, wrapped in a white shroud, and transported by male family members to a mosque where a cleric offers prayers. Relatives then transport the deceased for burial in a cemetery or within the family compound. Muslim mourners typically gather for memorial services on the 4th, 8th, and 40th or 41st day after the burial.

## 5. SEX AND GENDER

### Overview

Despite constitutional guarantees of political, social, and economic equality among Beninese citizens, some traditional customs tend to marginalize women and promote female subordination. As a result, women are underrepresented in government and business leadership positions and often become victims of physical violence and sexual harassment.

### Gender Roles and Work

Beninese society maintains a distinct division of labor between the genders. Within the home, women are responsible for preparing meals, childcare, and collecting water and firewood. In rural areas, women also typically perform agricultural chores like planting and harvesting crops. By contrast, men perform most heavy farm chores, such as clearing the land for planting. As household heads, men make the majority of family decisions and are the primary financial providers.

**Labor Force:** As of 2019, approximately 69% of women worked outside the home, higher than rates in the US (56%) and regional neighbors Burkina Faso (58%) and Niger (67%).



Single mothers represent a significant portion of this labor force and often work as entrepreneurs who sell food, produce, or clothing. Specialized loan programs designed by the government and non-profit organizations help women enter the workforce by providing the capital needed to open stores, restaurants, shops, and other small businesses. Although such financial programs increasingly provide new economic opportunities for women, prevailing patriarchal attitudes tend to limit women's ability to reach positions of authority within the workplace. Nevertheless, working women tend to maintain control of their own finances even after marriage, allowing them some economic autonomy (Photo: A Belgian sailor teaches two female Beninese sailors to pilot a zodiac boat).

## Gender and the Law

Despite legal guarantees of gender equality, discrimination and unequal treatment persist. It is particularly evident in rural areas where certain cultural and religious traditions and customary law (see p. 4 of *Political and Social Relations*) restrict women's rights. Furthermore, Beninese women across the country experience discrimination in obtaining employment, credit, equal pay, and property.

Although the law provides for equal inheritance and recognizes the rights of mothers, customary law designates males as the primary heirs to land and property and privileges the father's/husband's role over that of the wife/mother. For example, a woman's husband or husband's family may claim



her earnings for their own needs, limiting her opportunities for economic advancement. Across Benin, husbands frequently act as the gatekeepers of their wives' schedules, determining whether she may leave the home or visit friends and family (Photo: Belgian Navy personnel provide CPR instruction to a Beninese sailor).

Because women rarely inherit nor have the means to purchase land or property, they often lack the collateral needed to obtain credit. Some formal laws promote male

privilege. For example, Beninese mothers may pass on their nationality to their child only if the father is unknown or of unclear nationality. Otherwise, the child automatically is assigned the father's nationality.

## Gender and Politics

While women do not face legal barriers to vote or run for public office, patriarchal attitudes coupled with women's low literacy rates (see p. 1 of *Learning and Knowledge*) tend to inhibit their participation in politics. For example, women make up just 7% of Parliament members, a significantly lower rate than in neighboring Togo (16%) and Niger (17%) and the US (24%).

Despite some government attempts to increase women's political participation, the current Talon administration (see p. 6 of *Political and Social Relations*) has failed to make real change. For example, President Talon named just 3 women to his 21-member cabinet.

### **Gender Based Violence (GBV)**

Experts report that 70% of Beninese women experience GBV in their lifetime. While laws criminalize rape, sexual assault, and domestic violence, several factors prevent the reporting of crimes, investigation by the police, and punishment of perpetrators.

Generally, victims are reluctant to report offenses due to social stigma or fear of retaliation. Even if victims do report crimes, the police generally lack training in evidence collection and the



applicable law, compelling judges to reduce most sexual offense charges to misdemeanors. The prosecution of domestic violence crimes is especially difficult, with many judges refusing to even hear such cases (Photo: A US Navy sailor and Beninese women at a US military health event).

Despite laws criminalizing the act, sexual harassment is also common. It is especially prevalent in schools, where some male teachers harass their female students. Although illegal, forced marriages, particularly between men and young girls, are common and perhaps even widespread in rural areas. Traditionally, the marriage begins with the abduction and rape of the child bride.

**Female Genital Mutilation (FGM):** This practice refers to a procedure whereby a woman's sex organ is modified in a way that reduces her ability to experience sexual pleasure and is intended to discourage premarital sex and infidelity. Illegal in Benin, FGM's prevalence is decreasing as a result of public awareness campaigns that emphasize the physical dangers of

the practice. Nevertheless, FGM persists in some areas and among certain ethnic groups. Today, some 7% of Beninese females aged 15-49 have undergone the procedure, usually before age 13, with the rate increasing to almost 60% in some rural northern regions.

### Sex and Procreation

While extramarital sex is relatively common, Beninese traditionally view sexual intimacy as a private matter between married couples. At 5.5 births per woman, Benin's fertility rate is comparable to regional neighbors Togo (4.2), Burkina Faso, (4.5), and Niger (7) but is significantly higher than the US (1.8). Some Beninese women begin having children at a young age: in 2017,



some 86% of women had given birth between the ages of 15 and 19. Moreover, Beninese women suffer a high rate of death during childbirth (see p. 4 of *Sustenance and Health*).

Some 45% of Beninese women report that their husbands make their health decisions for them, particularly reproduction. This lack of decision-making control among women aggravates their overall lack of access to and knowledge of modern contraceptive methods. For example, just 16% of females aged 15-49 reported using contraception in 2018. Abortion is legal only in cases of incest, rape, or severe fetal defect (Photo: A Beninese woman and child).

### Homosexuality

While not expressly illegal, homosexual behavior is not openly accepted, and acts are sometimes prosecuted under public indecency laws. Consequently, homosexuals tend to conceal their sexual orientation. Nevertheless, public tolerance and acceptance is growing, and in 2015 LGBT groups met in Cotonou to discuss human rights issues.

## 6. LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

### Overview

Benin's official language, French, is also the primary language of business, government, education, and the media. Most Beninese speak 1 (or more) of 50 indigenous languages as their primary tongue. Due to this linguistic diversity, French also serves as a common tongue among speakers of different indigenous languages.



### French

First introduced to the region in the 17th century, French was the official language of colonial Dahomey, when it was part of French West Africa (see p. 6-9 of *History and Myth*). Upon achieving independence, Dahomey (later Benin – see p. 9 of *History and Myth*) retained French as its official language. Some 3 million Beninese, primarily urban-dwellers, speak French today. Many Beninese French-speakers utilize a variety known as **Français d'Afrique** (African French), a form of French adapted to the grammatical structures and vocabularies of African indigenous languages. These local adaptations can make African French difficult for standard French speakers to understand (Photo: US Navy sailor assists Beninese at an optometry clinic).

### Indigenous Languages

Benin's 50+ indigenous languages generally correspond to its ethnic identities (see p. 11-13 of *Political and Social Relations*). Some 49 of Benin's languages belong to the Niger-Congo language family, while only Dendi, a language spoken in the North, belongs to the Nilo-Saharan family.

The South is home to the Gbe and Yoruboid language groups, while Gur languages predominate the North interspersed with pockets of Atlantic, Mande, and Songhai languages. All of Benin's indigenous languages are tonal languages that use tone or pitch to convey meaning.

**Gbe:** Some 19 of Benin's languages belong to the Gbe group, the largest including Fon (about 1.2 million speakers) and Aja (about 600,000). Most speakers of Gbe languages concentrate along Benin's coast and around the cities of Cotonou and Porto-Novo.

**Yoruboid:** Speakers of Benin's 10 Yoruboid languages cluster in south-central Benin along the border with Nigeria, which is also home to a sizeable Yoruba-speaking population. The main Yoruboid languages are Nago (both Northern and Southern with about 450,000 speakers) and Yoruba (about 125,000).

**Gur:** Speakers of Benin's 15 Gur languages live throughout the less-populated North. The most common Gur languages are Baatonum (about 600,000 speakers) and Yom (around 450,000).

**Other indigenous languages:** Benin's other languages include varieties from the Atlantic language group (notably Fulfulde with about 300,000 speakers); the Mande language group (Boko, about 100,000 speakers); and the Songhai language group (Dendi, about 160,000 speakers). All these varieties are spoken in the North.

## English

Few Beninese speak English, though some business people, government officials, and employees of the tourism industry may have some knowledge of the language. While English is taught in secondary schools (see p. 5 of *Learning and Knowledge*), the quality of instruction is generally poor. Nonetheless, English is gaining in popularity, especially among Beninese who engage in business with Nigerians who speak Nigerian Pidgin, a lingua franca (a common language between speakers of different native languages) that includes elements of English and indigenous languages (Photo: Former US Secretary of State Kerry speaks with Benin's former President Yayi).



## Communication Overview

Effective communication in Benin requires not only knowledge of French or an indigenous language but also the ability to interact effectively using language. This broad notion of competence includes paralanguage (rate of speech, volume, intonation), nonverbal communication (personal space, touch, gestures), and interaction management (conversation initiation, turn-taking, and termination). When used properly, these forms



of communication help to ensure that statements are interpreted as the speaker intends (Photo: Beninese women teach sewing to a Peace Corps volunteer).

## Communication Style

Communication patterns vary due to Benin's religious

and ethnic diversity. For example, southern Beninese are typically open and outgoing, while Northerners tend to be more reserved. Nevertheless, most Beninese tend to be respectful of their conversation partners, especially elders, paying close attention and avoiding interruptions. Beninese typically have a gentle sense of humor and like making jokes and laughing at small problems. Yet they usually avoid cruel jokes and consider sarcasm particularly rude and disrespectful.



## Greetings

In keeping with society's emphasis on respect for others, Beninese typically extend greetings with great care. Beninese men generally shake hands, sometimes snapping their fingers following the handshake in less formal situations. When greeting an elder or other person entitled to great respect, Beninese may bow slightly or support the right elbow with the left hand during the handshake (Photo: A US Marine and US Embassy official meet Benin's Minister of Interior Placide Azande).

Greetings between men and women typically involve a handshake, though some women prefer only a verbal greeting. Consequently, foreign nationals should wait for members of the opposite sex to initiate a handshake. Friends and family generally greet each other with 3 or 4 alternating cheek kisses.

## Names

Many Beninese have French first names, although Beninese typically also have names that represent their ethnic and religious identities and have a specific meaning. Among the Fon, some children are named for events during childbirth. For example, a child born on the way to a market might be named *Alifoe* (“man of the road”). The Yoruba tend to give their children names based on their father’s occupation or details of their birth. Thus, the second-born of twins might be named *Kehinde* (“late arrival”). By contrast, the Bariba first name a baby according to its place in the family (see p. 4 of *Family and Kinship*), give it a Muslim name a few days later, and bestow its permanent name several years later (Photo: US Coast Guard member briefs Benin sailors).



## Forms of Address

Forms of address vary depending on age, status, and relationship. Beninese commonly use professional titles in both formal and informal situations. For example, a customer may refer to his taxi driver as **chauffeur**, while students address their teacher as **professeur**.

Beninese tend to address others of the same age and social status using their first name or a nickname. They also commonly use terms denoting family relationships with non-family, such as calling a young female friend **petite soeur** (“little sister”) or an older acquaintance **tante** (“aunt”). Beninese sometimes address elders as the mother or father of their firstborn child. For example, the Fon-speaking parents of a child named Dossa might be called **Dossanon** or **Dossato** (“Dossa’s mother” or “Dossa’s father”) or, among French speakers, **Maman Dossa** or **Papa Dossa**.

## Conversational Topics

Beninese often engage in extended conversation to demonstrate the importance of the relationship. For example, after exchanging greetings, Beninese typically ask a series of questions about health, work, and family, among other topics. Not intended as meddling, these questions demonstrate concern and interest. Beninese may also make remarks to indicate



their desire to keep a conversation going, such as asking “**Tu es là?**” (“Are you there?”), with the appropriate response simply “**Oui**” (“yes”). Beninese also habitually wish others good luck in whatever they are doing or might be doing later, covering a range of human activity such as “Good sitting,” “Good digesting,” “Good partying,” and, in professional settings, acknowledgement of hard work (Photo: US Navy sailors assist Beninese at a medical clinic in Cotonou).

## Gestures

Beninese tend to use hands during conversation as a substitute for spoken words or to add emphasis. For example, men slap the back of their hands and woman the back of their thighs to signal exasperation. They also use certain sounds for communication, such as making a clicking sound in the throat to signal agreement. Beninese do not beckon with their index fingers but typically retract all fingers into the right hand, held with the palm facing down. This beckoning gesture is somewhat similar to a greeting common in the US whereby a person waves an open hand, palm facing out, side-to-side. Consequently, the similarity of the two gestures may cause confusion and prompt some Beninese to interpret a wave as a beckoning.

## Language Training Resources

Please view the Air Force Culture and Language Center website at [www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/](http://www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/) and click on “Resources” for access to language training and other resources.

## Useful Words and Phrases

English	French
Hello	Bonjour
How are you?	Comment ça va or ça va?
I am well	Je suis bien or ça va
Yes	Oui
No	Non
Please	S'il vous plaît
Thank you	Merci
You are welcome	De rien
Excuse me	Excusez-moi
What is your name?	Quel est votre nom?
Where are you from?	D'où venez-vous?
Goodbye	Au revoir
What does ___ mean?	Que veut dire ___?
What is this?	Qu'est-ce que c'est que ça?
How do you say ___?	Comment dit-on ___?
...in English ...in French?	...en anglais ? ...en français?
I'm sorry	Pardon
Do you speak (French/English)?	Parlez-vous Français/Anglais ?
What do you want?	Qu'est-ce que vous voulez ?
What time is it?	Quelle heure est-il?
Where is the doctor?	Où est le médecin?
What is the price?	Quel est le prix ?
Who?	Qui?
When?	Quand?
Which?	Quel?
Why?	Pourquoi?
Where	Où?
Good morning/Good day	Bonjour
Good evening	Bonsoir
Good night	Bonne nuit

## 7. LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE

### Literacy

- Total population over age 15 who can read and write: 42.4%
- Male: 54%
- Female: 31.1% (2018 estimate)

### Traditional Education

Conventional approaches to education varied across time and ethnic groups. Beninese typically used informal, experience-based, and oral teaching styles to transmit customs, values, skills, and historical knowledge to younger generations. In some Beninese families today, elder family and community members still tell stories, sing songs, recite poems, and use coming-of-age rituals to pass on knowledge and skills.

With the 18th-century rise of the Kingdom of Dahomey (see p. 2-3 of *History and Myth*), education was limited customarily to administrators who oversaw a complex tax and census system. Few Dahomeans beyond this small class of bureaucrats received formal training or education.

### Education in Colonial Dahomey

Before formal colonization by the French, Catholic missionaries established mission schools in Dahomey in the late 19th century (see p. 4 of *Religion and Spirituality*). Concentrated in the South, these schools formed the basis of the region's education system after its incorporation into French West Africa in the early 20th century.



These institutions followed the French model of 6 years of primary followed by 6 years of secondary education, with French as the language of instruction. Because Dahomey had no post-secondary institutions, students seeking to continue their education had to travel to Senegal or Europe (Illustration: 1930 depiction of a Catholic mission and school in Porto-Novo).

The French intended their education system to immerse local inhabitants in French ideals and assimilate them into French culture, although the project largely failed. The French devoted far too few resources to the colony's development (see p. 7-8 of *History and Myth*), and formal education never reached more than a minority of Dahomeans. Educational infrastructure was particularly underdeveloped in the sparsely-populated North, where predominantly Muslim inhabitants were often reluctant to send their children to French schools operated by Christian missionaries.

### Education after Independence

Following Dahomey's 1960 independence, a decade of political instability (see p. 10 of *History and Myth*) prevented major education reform. By contrast, the country's 1974 shift to a Marxist-Leninist dictatorship (see p. 10 of *History and Myth*) brought significant change. Specifically, reforms focused on opening education to the entire population, removing French colonial influence, transferring mission schools to state control, and instilling an allegiance to socialism. The state mandated 6 years of free, compulsory primary education, replaced French with indigenous varieties as languages of instruction, and compelled students and teachers to contribute to school budgets through work (Photo: A Peace Corps member teaches an English class in Benin).

The results of these reforms were mixed. While enrolment increased significantly, the quality of education suffered. Despite requiring instruction in indigenous languages, the



state developed few or no educational materials in any of Benin's 50+ indigenous varieties (see p. 1-2 of *Language and Communication*). By the 1980s, in the midst of a national political and economic crisis (see p. 11 of *History and Myth*), trained teachers were fleeing Benin in droves, leading to a serious deterioration of educational standards, access, and outcomes. As the government abandoned its reforms plans, Benin recorded a 31% dropout rate in 1989.

Following Benin's 1990 transition to democracy (see p. 10-11 of *History and Myth*), the government called a national education conference to announce a new series of education reforms. Notable changes included the re-privatization of some schools, a new curriculum, and increased state funding for education. Nevertheless, serious issues remained. In 2000, almost 50% of schools occupied temporary structures, while only 15% of classrooms had chairs (Photo: US Navy sailor dances with schoolchildren in Cotonou).



structures, while only 15% of classrooms had chairs (Photo: US Navy sailor dances with schoolchildren in Cotonou).

### Modern Education System

Benin's education system today still follows the French model. With French the primary language of instruction, most lessons focus on memorization and rote learning. Government spending on education as a percentage of total expenditure has fluctuated in recent years, from a high of 26% in 2010 to 18.7% in 2016.

In comparison to its neighboring countries, Benin's educational spending is similar to Togo (16%) and Burkina Faso (18%) but higher than the US (14.5%). In 2014, Benin's government committed to maintaining education spending at 27%, yet missed that target in subsequent years. Consequently, Benin relies heavily on foreign aid to finance education, accepting some \$41 million from international organizations from 2014-2017 (see p. 6 of *Economics and Resources*).

Benin's education system faces numerous challenges that result in chronic poor performance. While tuition for primary school was abolished in 2006, secondary school is still fee-based and students at all levels must purchase books, uniforms, and school supplies, placing a heavy financial burden on families. Gender disparities in the educational system are pronounced: just 38% of eligible females were enrolled in secondary school in 2015, compared to 52% of males. Some parents are reluctant to send their daughters to school because of fear of sexual harassment by male teachers (see p. 3 of *Sex and Gender*).

Benin also faces serious challenges in teacher retention and training. In 2015, the average class size was 45 and only about 69% of teachers held the proper teaching credentials. Further, schools often lack adequate textbooks and supplies (Photo: Fulani girl at a school in northern Benin).



The government has introduced reforms to address these problems. To reduce gender disparities, the government provides tuition support for girls in secondary school, even waiving tuition entirely for girls studying science and technology. To overcome teacher shortages, the government strives to improve teacher training and recruitment. Criticism of the curriculum has led to an overhaul, with a greater focus on practical skills. Additionally, the government has proposed plans to better align the education system with the needs of the labor market and to allow foreign educational institutions to offer higher education. Nevertheless, Benin's educational outcomes are among the world's lowest, and parents who can afford it send their children to private schools (Photo: Members of a US government-supported Mothers' Association discuss how to keep girls in school).

**Pre-Primary:** Pre-primary education in Benin is optional. In 2018, some 25% of children of the appropriate age were enrolled, a rate that has steadily increased



since private nursery schools were introduced in the 1990s. The government has committed to funding additional public preschools to meet rising demand.

**Primary:** Benin's primary education program consists of 6 grades, typically starting at age 6. In 2018, some 97% of students of the appropriate age were enrolled in primary schools. The curriculum includes lessons in French, math, social studies, science and technology, art, and physical education. Despite being compulsory, the primary school graduation rate in 2016 was just 85% for boys and 76% for girls. Upon graduation, students receive a **Certificat d'Etudes Primaires** (Certificate of Primary Studies).

**Secondary:** Non-compulsory secondary school comprises 7 years divided into first-cycle (grades 7-10) and second-cycle (grades 11-13) programs. In 2015, just 45% of students of the appropriate age were enrolled in secondary education, and the graduation rate was 50% for males and 37% for females.



Secondary instruction builds on the primary school curriculum while adding classes in English, history, geography, biology, physics, family economics, civil education, philosophy, and other foreign languages. The first-cycle secondary program begins around age 12. Upon completion, students must pass the **Brevet d'Etudes du Premier Cycle** (First Cycle Studies Exam) to advance to the second-cycle program. Upon successful completion of the second-cycle program, graduates receive the title of **Baccalauréat de l'Enseignement Secondaire** (Bachelor of Secondary Education). Students may then advance to post-secondary programs of study (Photo: A Beninese student reads aloud in Fon at a community education center in Ouidah).

**Technical Education:** As an alternative to the first-cycle secondary program, students may choose to attend a 3-year technical institution. Programs of study are available in 6 subject areas: science and industry; science, administration, and management; science and agriculture; health, family, and social education; and hotel and restaurant management. Besides attending classes, students also complete apprenticeships.

Upon completion, graduates receive the **Certificat d'Aptitude Professionnelle** (Certificate of Professional Studies). Students may then choose to advance to a 3-year second-cycle technical program which awards them either a **Baccalauréat de l'Enseignement Secondaire Technique** (Bachelor of Secondary Technical Education) or a **Diplôme de Technicien Industriel** (Industrial Technician Diploma).

**Post-secondary:** Benin's first institution of higher learning was the University of Dahomey, founded in 1970. Known as the University of Abomey-Calavi today, the institution forms part of Benin's national university system, along with the University of Parakou; the National University of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics; and the National University of Agriculture. Additional post-secondary educational offerings include branch campuses of these public universities and

several private institutions located throughout the country (Photo: Members of a school's English club in Benin).



Most courses of post-secondary study require 2 years leading to the **Diplôme Universitaire** (University Diploma). An

additional year of study leads to the **Licence** (similar to a Bachelor's degree) and another 2 years result in the **Maîtrise** (Master's). Engineering, agronomy, and medical degrees require lengthier courses of study. Specialized post-secondary institutions offer teacher training and the award of the **Certificat d'Aptitude Pédagogique** (Certificate of Pedagogical Studies) for students who have earned a University Diploma.

### Islamic Education

Despite Benin's sizeable Muslim population (see p. 8 of *Religion and Spirituality*), the sparsely-populated North features few specialized Islamic educational institutions. By contrast, southern Benin is home to several "Franco-Arabic schools" sponsored by Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt that provide general and Islamic education in French and Arabic.

## 8. TIME AND SPACE

### Overview

Beninese tend to view personal relationships as the foundation of effective business negotiations. While customs often vary by context or ethnic group, most Beninese tend to exhibit a casual attitude towards time and punctuality.

### Time and Work

Offices generally open Monday-Friday from 8:00am-12:30pm and 3:00pm-6:30pm. While hours vary, shops and markets typically open Monday-Saturday from 9:00am-1:00pm and 4:00pm-7:00pm, with a break for lunch. Locally-owned shops and stalls are typically open whenever the owner is available, which is often around the clock (Photo: A Beninese vendor in a marketplace).

Major banks are open Monday-Friday 8:00am-5:00pm and on Saturday from 9:00am-1:00pm. While hours vary, restaurants are generally open from 11:00am-11:00pm, though some may close for a few hours at midday.

**Working Conditions:** The legal workweek in Benin is 40-46 hours, though agricultural workers may work up to 60 hours, 6 days a week. In practice, Beninese employed informally in the agricultural or domestic sectors often exceed the legal limit, working closer to 70 hours. While Benin has labor laws to protect workers, lax enforcement and a large informal sector enable violations like workplace discrimination and child labor (see p. 3 of *Family and Kinship*).

**Time Zone:** Benin adheres to West Africa Time (WAT), which is 1 hour ahead of Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) and 6 hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time (EST). Benin does not observe daylight savings time.



**Date Notation:** Like the US, Benin uses the Western (Gregorian) calendar. Unlike Americans, Beninese often write the day first followed by the month and year.

**Lunar Calendar:** Beninese use the Islamic calendar to track Muslim holidays. Since it is based on lunar phases, dates fall 11 days earlier each year in relation to the Western calendar. The Islamic calendar's 12 months each have 30 days or fewer. Days begin at sunset on what the Western calendar would show as the previous day. For example, each new week begins at sunset on Saturday, and the Muslim holy day of Friday begins on Thursday evening.

### National Holidays

- January 10: **Voudoun** Festival
- March/April: Easter Monday (dates vary)
- May 1: International Labor Day
- May/June: Ascension Day (dates vary)
- May/June: Whit Monday (dates vary)
- August 1: Benin Independence Day
- August 15: Assumption Day
- November 1: All Saint's Day
- December 25: Christmas Day

These Islamic holidays occur on variable dates according to the lunar calendar:

- **Korité (Eid al-Fitr):** End of Ramadan
- **Tabaski (Eid al-Adha):** Festival of Sacrifice
- **Maouloud:** Prophet Muhammad's birthday

### Time and Business

Successful business dealings typically depend on personal connections. Because they highly value the trust that arises in close relationships, most Beninese prefer that business associates also become friends, which is often facilitated by the exchange of gifts. Once the friendship is established, Beninese tend to expect preferential treatment or certain privileges and

may ask for favors, such as the hiring of their family members. Nevertheless, most Beninese maintain a division between work and family life. Business associate rarely host work functions at home, instead conducting business in the office or at small restaurants called *maquis* (see p. 3 of *Sustenance and Health*).

Communication in the office is typically formal. Employees address their superiors using their professional titles and use informal speech only with colleagues of a comparable age and position. In general, Beninese tend to avoid publicly discussing workplace disagreements. Instead, they often air their grievances with other colleagues privately (Photo: A US Marine presents a certificate to a Beninese sailor).



Most Beninese have a relaxed attitude towards time. Consequently, punctuality is often disregarded, and schedules and meetings are subject to last minute changes and cancellations. The everyday difficulties associated with poverty, illness, and the needs of family members are often the cause of meeting cancellations and workplace absences.

### Personal Space

As in most societies, personal space in Benin depends on the nature of the relationship. While privacy and personal space are often minimal among friends and family, an arm's length is an appropriate speaking distance between acquaintances. Degrees of personal space depend on factors such as ethnic identification and religion, and foreign nationals should follow the lead of their Beninese counterpart.

**Touch:** Beninese of the same sex often engage in more conversational touching than Americans. Same-sex male friends often touch each other on the arm or shoulder to emphasize a point or to demonstrate their close platonic relationship, while close female friends may hold hands (see p. 4 of *Language and Communication* for touching between opposite sexes).

**Left Hand Taboo:** Like people from other cultures in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, the Beninese consider the left hand unclean and reserve it for personal hygiene. Foreign nationals should avoid using the left hand when eating, gesturing, accepting items, or greeting another person, as these actions may offend their Beninese associates.

### Eye Contact

The appropriate amount of eye contact depends on age and gender. Generally, avoiding direct eye contact while speaking to an elder is a sign of respect. By contrast, friends typically maintain eye contact during conversations to signify their trustworthiness. Extended eye contact with a member of the opposite sex may signal romantic interest.

### Photographs

Government and military sites, airports, and religious buildings may restrict or prohibit photography (often marked with the notice *interdit* or “forbidden”). Foreign nationals should acquire a Beninese’s consent before taking his photo. Some Beninese may expect compensation in return (Photo: Beninese children).



### Driving

Poor road conditions and high carjacking rates, particularly in rural areas, make driving hazardous, while few traffic signals make road crossing dangerous for pedestrians. Benin’s rate of 28 road traffic deaths per 100,000 people is on par with neighbors Niger (28) and Togo (32), yet significantly higher than the US rate (11). Vehicles with 4-wheel drive are often necessary for travel in rural areas, where heavy seasonal rains make most roads completely impassable. To reduce the number of carjacking incidents, the police maintain roadblocks where officers inspect vehicles and documentation. *Zémidjans* (motorcycle taxis – see p. 1 of *Technology and Material*) are especially vulnerable to accidents and assaults. Beninese frequently use gasoline smuggled in from neighboring countries which typically has a poor quality that can cause serious damage to vehicles.

## 9. AESTHETICS AND RECREATION

### Overview

Benin's dress, recreation, music, and arts reflect the country's indigenous customs, religious diversity, and colonial influences. Many Beninese artists, musicians, and writers receive acclaim on the international stage.

### Dress and Appearance

In professional and urban settings Beninese tend to wear formal and conservative Western clothing. Styles are particularly conservative in predominantly Muslim areas, primarily the North, where residents are more likely to wear traditional clothing on Fridays (the Muslim holy day – see p. 2 of *Time and Space*). Generally, Beninese value a neat appearance, typically maintaining clean and pressed clothing.

**Men:** Traditional men's clothing consists of an ankle-length, embroidered robe called a **boubou** layered over a long tunic and matching pants. The ensemble typically features brightly colored and patterned traditional material. In rural areas, men sometimes wear a cloth wrapped around the waist paired with a **dashiki** (loose shirt) as casualwear.

**Women:** Traditional women's attire typically consists of a **pagne** (a large piece of colorfully patterned cotton fabric wrapped around the body and tucked in at the side) worn with a **boumba** (blouse) and a matching head wrap. The length of a woman's *pagne* indicates her age and marital status (older, married women tend to wear longer *pagnes*), though women of all ages tend to wear longer styles for formal occasions. For special events, a woman might add a *boubou* covered in intricate embroidery (Photo: Beninese in traditional dress wait for medicines).



### Recreation

Beninese typically spend their leisure time with family members and friends. Popular

pastimes include socializing, listening to the radio, relaxing in maquis (see p.3 of *Sustenance and Health*) and playing checkers, cards, and traditional games (see “Games” below). Singing, dancing, and making shopping trips to the market also serve as common social activities. Though widespread poverty limits recreational travel for most Beninese, some urban-dwellers make periodic visits to their home villages, particularly for family ceremonies and festivals.

**Festivals and Holidays:** Even Beninese who identify as Christian or Muslim typically celebrate various **Voudoun** ceremonies and events (see p. 1-3 of *Religion and Spirituality*). For example, Beninese celebrate National *Voudoun* Day with rituals and ceremonies conducted in temples across the country. During the **Gelede** festival, celebrants honor female ancestors, while petitioning the spirits for plentiful rain for the next harvest. Similarly, the **Egungun** festivities honor ancestors believed to have returned to earth temporarily to offer advice to the living. Both festivals feature specially trained dancers in elaborate costumes who alter their voices to embody the various spirits.



During the **zangbeto** ritual, dancers dressed in costumes resembling haystacks represent the *Voudoun* guardians of the night. Traditional enforcers of law and order, the **zangbeto** patrol the streets for criminals and ensure the safety of the community. Beninese also widely celebrate Christian and Muslim holidays. For example, many non-Christians celebrate Christmas, and during the Islamic holiday of **Tabaski** (see p. 7 of *Religion and Spirituality*), Muslim Beninese often invite non-Muslim neighbors to join the festivities. Other important national holidays include Independence Day, when Beninese enjoy parades and picnics. Although traditions vary among religious groups, most Beninese celebrate New Year's by gathering with friends and family to share a meal and await the new year (Photo: *Egungun* dance costume from the mid-20th century).

**Sports:** Football (soccer) is Benin's most popular sport and pastime. Most boys, men, and some girls play in community games, often with improvised materials.

The Beninese national soccer team, nicknamed **Les Écureuils** (the Squirrels), has had little international success, though many on its squad play for European professional



teams. Other popular sports include basketball, handball, running, and wrestling. Female participation in sports is historically low, yet various initiatives aim to increase that rate (Photo: Benin Sailors and Marines pose with US Marines following a volleyball game).

**Games:** Beninese enjoy an array of traditional games. Also known as **adji** or **mancala**, **oware** is a popular 2-person game in which players try to capture an opponent's game pieces – usually pebbles or seeds – by moving them according to certain rules across a board with small pits. Other popular games include checkers and cards.

### Music and Dance

Drums are the foundation of traditional Beninese music. Instruments range from the high-pitched **keri**, played with a stick or hand, to the single-membrane **gudugdu** and the 2-headed, hourglass-shaped **dundun**. Experienced drummers adjust the drum's tension, while playing to create complex rhythms, a skill that was also used historically to transmit information between and among villages. Besides drums, bells and rattles also feature prominently in traditional music.

Dance is an important part of daily life and an integral part of many **Voudoun** ceremonies (see p. 2 of *Religion and Spirituality*). Dancers typically coordinate their movements to the rhythms of the drums to depict the characteristics of the spirit or the events they are portraying. For example, in performances honoring **Shango**, the spirit of thunder, male and

female dancers encircle a tree. While the women move quickly with short steps, the men slap their hands on their sides. At the same time, three different drums create short, sharp beats reminiscent of thunder claps.

Recognized internationally is 4-time Grammy winner Angélique Kidjo who sings in English and French in addition to Fon and Yoruba (see p. 2 of *Language and Communication*). Many popular bands mix West African with other musical traditions. For example, the Gangbe Brass band melds jazz, big band music, and traditional Beninese rhythms, while the group



Africando All Stars features New York salsa musicians and West African vocalists (Photo: Beninese celebrate the opening of a health clinic with music and dance).

## Theater and Cinema

Theater is an important form of entertainment especially for Beninese who lack electricity and access to television (see p. 1 of *Family and Kinship*). Traveling theater groups regularly set up makeshift stages in the middle of villages and perform plays for the community. Beninese actor Djimon Hounsou has gained fame in several Hollywood films and received two Oscar nominations.

## Literature

Benin has a rich history of oral literature. Traveling storytellers called ***griots*** traditionally roam the country sharing genealogies, histories, proverbs, poems, and folktales, often accompanied by music. A primary source of history and entertainment since ancient times, *griots* remain popular across the country and West Africa at large.

Beninese authors face several hurdles to publication and dissemination of their written literature, although several Beninese authors have received international recognition. Considered Africa's first novel, Félix Couchoro's 1920 work

*L'Éclaire* cleverly criticized colonial elites, while using a distinct form of African French (see p. 1 of *Language and Communication*). In the 1970s-80s, playwright and author Jean Pliya explored the colonial experience and translated traditional Fon stories for French-speakers. Finally, philosopher Paulin Hountondji's 1976 work *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality* is considered one of Africa's 100 best books of the 20th century.



### Folk Arts and Handicrafts

Traditional Beninese art and handicrafts often serve practical, spiritual, and aesthetic purposes. Folk artists typically utilize metal, leather, wood, cotton, or clay to make pottery, textiles, furniture, costumes, tools, and instruments. For example, weavers use looms to create both everyday and ceremonial clothing

worn for important events like weddings, funerals, and baby-naming rituals (see p. 4-7 of *Family and Kinship*). Woodworking artists carve intricate masks blending human and animal features that help dancers embody the spirits they represent when performing *Voudoun* rituals. **Toiles appliqués** is a traditional sewing technique in which layers of colored cloth create a tapestry (Photo: Early 19th-century wooden throne of King Guézo – see p. 4 of *History and Myth*).

Beninese sculpture and carvings traditionally use mystical and abstract forms and distorted ratios to convey information about the essence of an object instead of creating a perfect likeness. This technique has inspired many Western artists such as renowned 20th-century Spanish artist Pablo Picasso, who admired the magical element of the masks and sculptures used in West African



rituals (Photo: Mid-20th century Yoruba mask from Benin).

## 10. SUSTENANCE AND HEALTH

### Sustenance Overview

Beninese value time spent with family and friends, gathering frequently for meals in the home. While cuisine varies by region, most Beninese dishes tend to incorporate fresh, local, and seasonally available ingredients.

### Dining Customs

Although dining customs vary across the country, most Beninese eat 1-3 daily meals, depending on their income. Rural farmers, for example, typically eat three daily meals, including a hearty breakfast and lunch in the fields followed by a small evening meal at home.



By contrast, poor urban workers may have just one large meal during the day, supplemented with various snacks (Photo: Beninese fishermen).

Women traditionally prepare all meals, cooking over fires built outdoors or in small outbuildings to keep smoke and heat away from the main dwellings (see p. 1 of *Family and Kinship*). Because most homes have no refrigeration, families purchase fresh ingredients from local markets multiple times a week. Guests and male family members usually eat first, followed by children and women. Men customarily consume the largest portions of food and receive the best pieces of meat and fish.

Families typically eat from several large, centrally-placed shared dishes. While they may utilize spoons and other utensils for some dishes, Beninese commonly use their fingers and thumb to scoop food into their mouths. Beninese eat only with their right hand, as the left hand is considered to be unclean (see p. 4 of *Time and Space*). Beninese consider it rude to refuse food and expect guests to sample some of each dish offered by the host.

## Diet

Benin's cuisine varies by region and depends largely on the availability of fresh, seasonal ingredients. Generally, meals prominently feature a staple starch accented by comparatively small portions of meat, fish, and fresh vegetables. In the North, primary staples include sorghum and yams, and in the South, corn, cassava (starchy tuberous root also known as manioc), and millet. Usually served as thick, doughy porridges collectively known as **pate**, these staples accompany spicy, aromatic sauces incorporating numerous ingredients, such as vegetables, nuts, herbs, and occasionally meat or fish. Rice, pasta, couscous (a form of pasta that originated in Northwest African), are also popular but generally reserved for holidays and special occasions.

Beef is a common protein in the North, while fish features prominently in southern dishes, especially in communities along Benin's coast and rivers. Common varieties include carp, tilapia, and perch, which may be served dried, smoked, fried, boiled, or sautéed, often in palm oil. Other forms of protein include goat, lamb, chicken, and **agouti** (a rodent known as the greater cane rat). Other notable meats consumed mostly in rural areas include antelope, wild rabbit, lizard, and snake.



Beninese enjoy a wide variety of vegetables, notably onions, beans, tomatoes, okra, and cucumbers. Beninese also consume various tropical fruits, such as mangoes, breadfruit, papayas, bananas, pineapples, and avocados. While less popular among southern Beninese, dairy products comprise an important component of northern diets. Some Beninese may adhere to

certain dietary restrictions. For example, observant Muslims (see p. 8 of *Religion and Spirituality*) consume neither pork nor alcohol. In addition, they observe particular rules of animal slaughter and meat preparation to ensure that food is **halal**, allowed by Islamic law (Photo: Mango tree in northern Benin).

## Meals and Popular Dishes

Breakfast is usually light, often tea paired with bread or **koko**, hot cereal. Lunch is the largest and main meal, although in some areas, dinner is also substantial. Most lunch and dinner dishes include **pate**, consisting of ground millet, sorghum, corn, or yams, boiled and stirred until the mixture achieves a doughy, hardened consistency. Formed into balls, **pate** is served with various dipping sauces, cubed meats, cheeses, fish, or eggs. Popular varieties include **akassa** (made from fermented corn) and **amiowo** (red in color and made from corn and palm oil).

Although the exact preparation of sauces varies by region, the most common components include peanuts, okra, garlic, onions, chili peppers, and dried tomato. Other common dishes include **wagasi** (fried, cubed cheese made from milk and tree sap – a popular accompaniment to **pate** in the North); **igname pilee** (pounded yam); **wache** (brown rice mixed with beans and spices); and **gari** (a thin porridge made from cassava that is similar to grits and consumed by the very poor). For dessert, Beninese enjoy **brioche**, sweet bread, or fresh fruit juices (Photo: Beninese women make **kuli kuli**, fried rolls of peanut paste).



## Eating Out

While the urban upper class enjoys dining at French restaurants, the average Beninese only occasionally eats out. In urban areas, markets, vendors, and casual eateries (**maquis** or **buvettes**) sell a variety of traditional Beninese fare and various street foods, such as fresh juice, fried bananas, bread, omelets, tofu, **beignets** (fluffy, fried pastries), and other snacks. Tipping is uncommon.

## Beverages

Beninese enjoy tea and coffee throughout the day. Freshly squeezed juices, notably papaya, orange, pineapple, and mango, are also popular. Alcoholic beverages include various locally-produced beers, such as Flag, Castel, and Beninoise,

**sodabi** (palm wine), and **tchoucoutou** (a thick, sweet beer brewed from millet and primarily consumed in the North). Imported wine, beer, and spirits are available in urban areas.

## Health Overview

Although the government has made improvements to Benin's healthcare infrastructure since transitioning to democracy in 1991, the population's overall health remains poor. With 397 deaths per 100,000 live births, Benin's maternal mortality rate remains among the world's highest, exceeding the US rate (19) by nearly 21 times.

Infant mortality (the proportion of infants who die before age 1) decreased substantially from 105 deaths per 1,000 live births in 1991 to 59 deaths in 2020. Nevertheless, it remains the world's 15th highest, well above the US rate of 5.3 and higher than the Sub-Saharan average of 53. Moreover, although life expectancy at birth increased from 54 to 61 years between 1991-2020, it remains significantly lower than the global average of 73 and US average of 80.

Some 40% of the population lives below the poverty line and about 17% of Beninese children under age 5 are underweight, the world's 36th highest rate of child malnutrition. Generally,



the healthcare system suffers a lack of funding and a shortage of medical professionals. Many facilities, even in urban areas, are dilapidated, overcrowded, and understaffed. The quality of care diminishes further in rural areas, effectively denying many rural Beninese access to modern healthcare (Photo: A US Navy hospital corpsman discusses vitamins and oral hygiene with a Beninese woman).

## Traditional Medicine

Traditional medicine consists of the knowledge, practices, and skills derived from a native population's beliefs, experiences, and theories. Traditional Beninese medicine centers on the use of herbal remedies rather than surgical procedures to identify

and treat illness and is routinely used both in urban and rural areas. Traditional healers are typically religious figures (see p. 3 of *Religion and Spirituality*) who incorporate a spiritual component in their treatments. Beninese consult such healers to cleanse the body of illness, ward off spirits believed to bring sickness, and restore physical and mental wholeness.

### Modern Healthcare System

Benin's healthcare system remains in a state of disrepair and is largely unable to provide preventative, maternal, long-term, and emergency care for the majority of the population. While there are a number of modern hospitals in urban areas, the majority of Benin's medical facilities are outdated, ill-equipped, and severely understaffed. In addition, many pharmacies are understocked in even the most common medicines, while others sell ineffective or even harmful counterfeit versions. Because some medical facilities and practitioners require payment before services are rendered, some patients delay or forgo treatment altogether.

Moreover, hospitals and clinics are concentrated in cities and significantly underserve rural dwellers. Small, rural clinics often operate without electricity, running water, and sanitation and lack the resources and medical expertise to treat serious illnesses. In more remote areas, residents must travel long distances to seek medical care, making modern healthcare completely inaccessible for many. Consequently, traditional folk medicines remain the standard for many Beninese.



Benin also suffers from a lack of trained medical personnel. As of 2016, Benin had just 16 physicians per 100,000 people, below the World Health Organization's recommendation of 23 physicians per 100,000 people and significantly below the US rate of 257. Although Benin's few private facilities generally offer higher quality care, they are unaffordable to most Beninese (Photo: A US Navy medic examines a baby during a health fair in Cotonou).

## Health Challenges

As is common in developing countries, communicable, infectious, and parasitic diseases are the leading causes of illness and death in Benin, accounting for 54% of all deaths in 2016. Predominant diseases include bacterial and protozoal diarrhea, hepatitis, typhoid fever, yellow fever, tuberculosis, dengue fever, and meningitis. In addition, widespread poverty and a lack of prenatal, maternal, and child health services results in widespread child malnutrition, which facilitates the spread of disease. In recent years, incidences of non-communicable diseases such as heart disease, cancer, chronic respiratory diseases, and digestive diseases have also become prevalent, accounting for about 36% of all deaths in 2016.



Meanwhile, preventable “external causes,” such as car accidents, suicides, and other injuries, caused about 10% of all deaths.

Some 70,000 Beninese or about 1% of the population are HIV/AIDS positive. While relatively

low compared to other African nations, this rate is concerning. HIV disproportionately affects women and rural dwellers who lack comprehensive knowledge of HIV transmission and prevention methods (Photo: A mother and child sit in front of a mosquito net provided by the US to help combat malaria).

Benin’s government struggles to provide clean drinking water and sanitation services to the population. As of 2017, about 76% of urban dwellers and 58% of rural residents had access to clean drinking water, while just 27% of urban and 8% of rural dwellers had access to modern sanitation facilities. Shortages of potable water and improper disposal of human waste contribute to high rates of communicable diseases, such as malaria, cholera, and tuberculosis. Intermittent flooding further contaminates drinking water and puts Beninese at greater risk of infection from various parasites, bacteria, and water-borne diseases.

## 11. ECONOMICS AND RESOURCES

### Overview

For centuries, most regional inhabitants subsisted as small farmers or animal herders. In the 18th century, the Kingdom of Dahomey rose to prominence as a key supplier in the trans-Atlantic slave trade (see p. 2-4 of *History and Myth*). In return, Dahomey acquired European manufactured goods, notably weapons, allowing the Kingdom to become a regional power.

The decline of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in the mid-19th century (see p. 4 of *History and Myth*) marked the end of Dahomey's economic boom. In response, Dahomey's leaders sought other sources of income, notably the export of palm oil produced by slaves on royal plantations (see p. 4 of *History and Myth*). By the beginning of the 20th century, France had incorporated Dahomey into French West Africa.

French colonial administrators dedicated few resources to the colony (see p. 7-8 of *History and Myth*), viewing it as economically unimportant for France despite Dahomey's limited exports of cotton, palm oil, and peanuts. Instead, the colony served strategic purposes, both as a buffer to German and British expansion in West Africa and as an important transportation corridor for goods to and from Africa's interior. To facilitate the movement of goods, the French made significant improvements to the Port of Cotonou and developed a road and railroad network connecting it to Niger and Upper Volta (Burkina Faso today) (Photo: Historic photo of Cotonou rail station).

Upon achieving independence in 1960, Dahomey faced severe challenges to its political and economic stability (see p. 10 of *History and Myth*), resulting in a decade of coups that effectively hindered economic development.



In 1974, President Kérékou declared Benin a Marxist-Leninist state (see p. 10 of *History and Myth*) and nationalized almost all sectors of the economy. Boosted by aid from the Soviet Union (USSR), North Korea, and Cuba, the socialist experiment was initially a success. The economy was also helped by limited production of oil from the offshore Semè field, which peaked at about 2.9 million barrels a year in the late 1980s. Nevertheless, an economic downturn in the 1980s plus

the withdrawal of Soviet support left the country in a severe crisis (see p. 11 of *History and Myth*). Desperate for investment, Kérékou denounced Marxism in 1990 and struck a deal with the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. Financial aid and



private investment flowed in, bolstering infrastructure and public services. Nevertheless, austerity measures imposed by creditors meant that most Beninese remained mired in poverty (Photo: A busy market in Benin).

Throughout the 1990s, Benin's economy steadily improved, helped by substantial aid from Europe and an increase in Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). In 1994, Benin's currency, the West African CFA Franc (see "Currency" below), was sharply devalued, making Benin's exports more competitive. While the economy remained dominated by subsistence farming, the government encouraged the development of agro-business, primarily cotton for export. At the same time, a small industrial sector began to develop.

In the 2000s, cotton remained Benin's most significant export, though limited processing capacity meant exports were limited to low-value raw cotton. During this period, Benin prioritized the privatization of several state-owned industries, notably cotton production and operations at the Port of Cotonou. Production of oil at the Semè field began declining in the late 1990s, and by 2003, the site was abandoned. Meanwhile, the European Union provided an infusion of €275 million between 2002-2007.

Benin's economy grew steadily, yet at lower rate than the African average.

Today, Benin's economy relies almost entirely on agricultural exports and informal trade with Nigeria, placing it on precarious footing. Agriculture has proven vulnerable to weather-related events (such as the 2010 floods) and international price shocks. Meanwhile, events in Nigeria (such as the 2017 devaluation of the *naira*, Nigeria's currency) could potentially affect Benin's economy negatively.

Benin also continues to rely heavily on foreign aid, especially for the development of infrastructure. In 2015, an international aid organization provided some \$375 million for electricity production upgrades, reducing blackouts and attracting FDI. Likewise, the Port of Cotonou, which provides some 80% of Benin's tax revenues, continues to attract investment.



Despite an average 5% growth rate since 2014, Benin remains one of the world's poorest countries, with 91% of the population living on less than \$5.50 per day and 50% living on less than \$1.90 in 2015 (Photo: A Beninese woman prepares beans).

Several challenges impede Benin's economic development, notably the large informal economy and widespread corruption. Informality is a particularly serious problem, with some 65% of the total economy outside the control of the government, making it untaxed and unregulated. Likewise, Benin routinely ranks poorly in international corruption indices, placing 85 of 180 countries in a 2018 study, a factor that serves to discourage entrepreneurship and FDI. The government has announced reforms to the regulatory and tax systems to encourage private investment and public-private partnerships. Nonetheless, these plans have proven unpopular, especially among public service employees who went on strike in early 2018 in protest.

## Services

The services sector is the largest component of Benin's economy, accounting for 51% of GDP and 39% of the labor force. The sector consists primarily of retail trade and commerce, notably the import of goods through the Port of Cotonou for resale in Benin and neighboring countries. The government has proposed plans for investment in telecommunications infrastructure to establish Benin as a digital services hub for West Africa.

**Transportation:** Transportation comprises the most important services sub-sector. About 1/2 of all goods arriving at the Port of Cotonou are reexported to Nigeria, though significant amounts also flow to Niger and Burkina Faso. The sub-sector is expected to grow once planned railroad links connect Benin with its neighbors (see p. 1 of *Technology and Material*).

**Tourism:** The number of international tourists visiting Benin annually more than tripled between 2002-17 to 281,000. Despite the steady growth, Benin attracts comparatively few tourists due to a lack of infrastructure and suitable facilities. Attractions include the palaces of Abomey (see p. 4 *History and Myth*), the former slave port of Ouidah, and Pendjari and W National Parks, among others.



## Agriculture

The agricultural sector consists of farming, livestock, fishing, and forestry and accounts for some 23% of GDP and 41% of the labor force. The government has

announced plans to establish regional agriculture development centers to conduct research and promote high-value crops. Official statistics do not fully account for Beninese who work small plots for their own subsistence (Photo: US Army soldier assists Beninese farmers).

**Farming:** Benin's main agricultural products are cotton, corn, cassava, yams, beans, palm oil, and nuts. As Benin's primary cash crop, cotton accounts for about 25% of exports, while nuts

comprise about 22%. Most other agricultural products are intended for local consumption. Cotton is largely exported raw, with only a small portion undergoing processing locally. Under the control of the government since 2012, the cotton market has been returned to private control under current President Patrice Talon, known as the “King of Cotton” (see p. 13 of *History and Myth*).

**Fishing:** While there is little large-scale harvesting, fishing is an important source of food, with an estimated 40,500 Beninese working as fishermen. In 2016, marine fisheries produced around 49,806 tons with aquaculture operations generating another 3,080.

**Forestry:** In 1990, some 50% of Benin’s total land area was covered in forests. By 2015, the forested area had shrunk to 38%, primarily due to the clearing of forests for farming, commercial logging, and firewood (see p. 3 of *Political and Social Relations*). In 2016, Benin exported limited amounts of wood to India, Italy, China, and Togo. The government designates certain forests as “sacred” areas where public access and commercial use is prohibited.

## Industry

Comprising 22% of GDP and 20% of Benin’s labor force, the industrial sector is composed of large enterprises such as cement factories, textile plants, and agricultural processing plants, and some small-scale gold mining operations. Some 90% of Benin’s industrial capacity is located in Cotonou. The sector has shown strong growth, especially as cotton ginning begins to transition from village-level to larger industrial facilities. While the Semè oil field was abandoned in 2003, significant reserves have recently been discovered at the site. Despite plans for commercial production, as of 2019 no oil extraction has occurred.

## Currency

Benin uses the West African CFA Franc (CFA) (pictured), issued in 5 banknotes (500, 1000, 2000, 5000, 10000) and 7 coins (1, 2, 5, 10, 25, 100, 500). While the



CFA franc subdivides into 100 **centimes**, no *centime* currency is currently in use. CFA francs are pegged to the Euro at a rate €1=654 CFA and are backed by the French Treasury. In early-2020, \$1 was worth 599 CFA (1 CFA was worth about 1/5 of a cent). Regulated by the Central Bank of West African States, the CFA franc serves as the official currency of the West African Economic and Monetary Union and is in use in Benin, Burkina Faso, Guinea-Bissau, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, Niger, Senegal, and Togo. The West African CFA Franc is equal in value to the Central African CFA Franc, which is used in the member states of the Central African Financial Community.

### Foreign Trade

Benin's exports, totaling \$952 million in 2018, primarily consisted of cotton, nuts, mineral products, seed and nut oils, and metals sold to Bangladesh (23%), India (18%), Vietnam (10%), Nigeria (8%), and China (8%). In the same year, Benin imported \$3.3 billion in foodstuffs, capital goods, and petroleum products from Thailand (14%), India (12%), Togo (9%), China (8%), and France (7%). Much of Benin's informal, cross-border trade goes unrecorded by customs officials. If recorded, this informal trade would likely indicate Nigeria is a more significant import and export partner.



### Foreign Aid

In 2018, Benin received approximately \$628.9 million in humanitarian and development aid, primarily from international aid donors.

Of these funds, 54% was earmarked for economic infrastructure and services, 9% for education, 8% for health and population, and 8% for other social infrastructure and services. In 2019, the US provided some \$79 million in aid, 32% for health-related projects, primarily countermeasures against malaria. For the year 2020, the US plans to provide another \$19 million for similar projects (Photo: Beninese children fetch water).

## 12. TECHNOLOGY AND MATERIAL

### Overview

Benin's physical infrastructure remains largely underdeveloped and in poor condition, and most Beninese lack access to modern telecommunications. The government occasionally restricts freedom of speech and press.

### Transportation

Walking is the most common form of transportation. A few Beninese own motorcycles or privately-owned vehicles (POV), mostly imported used cars. Cotonou, Porto-Novo, and larger towns offer limited public transportation options such as taxis, minibuses, and **zémidjans** (motorcycle taxis). Large buses carry passengers between major urban areas, while most travel within rural areas occurs by **taxi-brousses** (bush taxis), which collect passengers in designated **autogares** (auto stations) (Photo: Motorcyclists in Cotonou).



**Roadways:** In 2006, only about 9% of Benin's 9,941 mi of roadway were paved, notably the highways connecting Cotonou, Porto-Novo, and Parakou and routes linking Benin to neighbors Togo, Niger, and Nigeria. Many unpaved dirt roads outside cities are impassable during the rainy season.

**Railways:** Benin's 272 mi of railway consists of 2 lines: one connects Cotonou to Parakou while the other comprises a coastal route linking Segboroué, Cotonou, Porto Novo, and Pobè. A Beninese court decision halted construction of a long-planned railroad connecting Parakou to Niamey, Niger in 2016. As of 2019, construction believed to be progressing. If completed, the route would become part of a planned regional rail system connecting Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, Benin, Nigeria, Niger, and Burkina Faso. Nevertheless, these plans have stalled due to a lack of financing and technical challenges in integrating rail systems across the countries.

**Ports and Waterways:** Benin has some 75 mi of Atlantic coastline along the Bight of Benin. In addition, Benin has access to 93 mi of the Niger River, which runs along its

northern border and is navigable during the rainy season. The Ouémé, Couffo, and Mono rivers are also navigable by small boats.



Benin's only seaport, Cotonou, is a major hub for West African trade, handling goods bound for

Nigeria, Togo, Niger, and Burkina Faso. The government has announced plans to modernize the port and the surrounding road network (Photo: US Coast Guard personnel and Beninese sailors during a military exercise).

**Airways:** Of Benin's 6 airports, only Cotonou Cadjehoun Airport has a paved runway. A hub for RwandAir, Rwanda's flag carrier, Cotonou Cadjehoun offers flights to Europe and other major African cities, serving over 500,000 passengers in 2017. The government plans to complete a new international airport in Glo-Djigbé, north of Cotonou, by 2021.

## Energy

While Benin produced as many as 8,000 barrels a day (b/d) in the late 1980s, it has not produced any crude oil in several decades (see p. 2 of *Economics and Resources*). Consequently, the country is reliant on imported petroleum products, consuming some 38,000 b/d in 2016. This figure does not include **kpayo**, unregulated gasoline smuggled across Benin's borders and sold in cans and bottles at roadside stands.

Benin has little electricity-generating capacity, importing some 95% of its electricity from Ghana and Nigeria in 2016. Generally, the power grid is small and unreliable – just 43% of Beninese had access to electricity in 2017, and among rural dwellers, that number dipped to 17%. In 2017, the government announced plans to add solar and other renewable energy facilities to increase electricity generating capacity.

## Media

Benin's constitution guarantees freedom of speech and press, although the government occasionally restricts those rights. Laws require print media companies to file every edition with the public prosecutor, while online media companies must obtain a license to distribute content. The government has used both provisions to regulate media outlets (Photo: Former President Yayi gives a speech during the African Heads of State Conference in 2012).



While defamation and libel have been decriminalized, some specific acts, such as insulting the President and endangering national security, remain criminal offenses, punishable by imprisonment. The government sometimes broadly interprets these provisions to bring charges against journalists who criticize its decisions and actions. Nevertheless, the government only occasionally jails journalists, usually releasing them quickly.

The media are frequently critical of both governmental and oppositional political figures, prompting the government's media oversight body, the High Authority for Audiovisual and Communication (HAAC), to occasionally ban newspapers. In 2016, the HAAC temporarily banned 4 media organizations and in early 2018, suspended the license of a private media outlet after it published an article deemed insulting to the President.

**Print Media:** Benin has some 175 newspapers and periodicals. Prominent newspapers include the state-owned *La Nation* and private publications *Le Matinal*, *Fraternité*, *Le Républicain*, *L'Aurore*, and *L'Événement Précis*, all published in French.

**Radio and TV:** Due to high rates of illiteracy (see p. 1 of *Learning and Knowledge*) and limited electricity availability, most Beninese receive their news via portable radio. The government operates 3 stations, a national station (*Radio*

Nationale) and 2 regional stations (*Radio Parakou* and *Atlantic FM*), that broadcast in French and 18 indigenous languages (see p. 1-2 of *Language and Communication*).



Chaine 2, and Canal 3 (Photo: A US Naval officer is interviewed by local Beninese media).

Commercial radio stations such as *CAPP FM*, *Golfe FM*, and *Radio Immaculée Conception* are also popular. The government also operates a TV channel, *Television Nationale*, which broadcasts alongside the private *Golfe TV*, *La*

### Telecommunications

Benin's telecommunications network has a limited reach and is generally of poor quality. In 2018, Benin had less than 1 landline and 79 cellular subscriptions per 100 inhabitants but is growing rapidly, particularly in urban areas (Photo: US Navy sailor and his Beninese counterpart repair a radar installation in Benin).



**Internet:** Internet is generally available only in Benin's larger towns and cities. In

2018, Benin had less than 1 fixed broadband and 8 mobile broadband subscriptions per 100 people, and just under 20% of the population accessed the Internet. Generally, authorities neither restrict access nor block or censor content. While the government has announced development plans that would provide Internet access to 80% of the population by 2021, little progress has been made toward this goal so far. Nevertheless, Internet usage rates will likely increase in coming years due to the growing availability of inexpensive smart phones.



For more information on  
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