Expeditionary Culture Field Guide

NIGER

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.

The guide consists of 2 parts:

Part 1 introduces "Culture General," the foundational knowledge you need to operate effectively in any global environment (Photos courtesy of IRIN News 2012 © Jaspreet Kindra).

Part 2 presents "Culture Specific" Niger, focusing on unique cultural features of Nigerien 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.

For further information, visit the Air Force Culture and Language Center (AFCLC) website at www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/ or contact AFCLC's Region Team at 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.

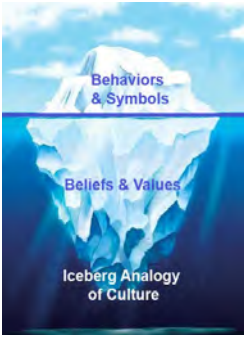
As depicted in the chart below, we can apply the 12 cultural domains to help us compare similarities and differences across cultures. We evaluate others' behavior to determine if they are "people like me" or "people not like me." Consequently, we assume that individuals falling into the "like me" category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

PART 2 – CULTURE SPECIFIC

1. HISTORY AND MYTH

Overview

The history of Niger is a tale of empires competing over various parts of a vaguely defined and steadily drying expanse of land. Niger's recent history has been characterized by ethnic revolts, recurrent drought, and repeated military coups.

Early Niger

Although Niger today consists mainly of desert, the country was lush and fertile during its prehistory and populated by bands of hunter-gatherers. Stone tools found in northern and western Niger indicate that the first such groups arrived in the area at least as early as 300,000 years ago. Recently, extensive archaeological remains found at Gobero in central Niger give evidence of long-term occupation between 14000 and 10000 BC.

The climate of the region began to grow hotter and drier around 4000 BC. As the Sahara Desert expanded, many inhabitants of what is now Niger migrated southward into areas that were still fertile and began growing crops such as sorghum and millet. The rest of the population stayed in the arid regions and began herding livestock, as hunting and gathering increasingly failed to meet their subsistence requirements.

Several forms of technology and artistic expression developed at this time. The earliest copper and iron objects found in Niger date to this period, while the earliest examples of bronze and brass alloys date to a few centuries later. Pottery became both more common and more ornamental, and a variety of rock engravings were produced in the Aïr Mountains of northern Niger.

By the 5th century BC, trade caravans dealing in beads, ivory, metals, salt, and slaves began passing through what is now Niger while traveling between Egypt and Carthage. A variety of kingdoms arose over the next several centuries, but few details were recorded until Arab traders arrived in the 8th century AD. In addition to their penchant for written history, the Arab traders introduced Islam to the region (see *Religion and Spirituality*).

The Age of Empires

From the end of the first millennium AD until the beginning of the 19th century, the territory of present-day Niger functioned as an ever-shifting frontier between a succession of empires that overlapped in both time and space. Although none of those kingdoms ever controlled the entirety of present-day Niger, they all contributed to the culture, customs, and ethnic composition of modern Niger.

The Kanem-Bornu Empire

One of the earliest states was the Kanem Empire, founded on the northeast shore of Lake Chad in the 9th century AD. Ruled for most of its history by the Sefuwa dynasty, Kanem became an Islamic state at the end of the 11th century. It reached its height in the 13th century, when it extended into the present-day states of Cameroon, Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Libya.

Kanem fell in the late 14th century due to economic difficulties, internal political divisions, and an invasion from the East by the Bulala people. The Sefuwa dynasty then regrouped at Bornu (present-day northeastern Nigeria) and gave birth to the Kanem-Bornu Empire, which extended its rule across much of the former Kanem Empire during the 16th century.

After reaching the height of its power at the beginning of the 17th century, Kanem-Bornu entered a long, slow decline. The Sefuwas were expelled in the early 19th century, and Kanem-Bornu dissolved completely in 1893 after Rabih Fadlallah, a Sudanese warlord, invaded the territory (Pictured: Muhammad al-Amin al-Kanemi, the first non-Sefuwa Sheikh of Bornu).

The Songhai Empire

Founded at roughly the same time as Kanem, Songhai traces its origins to the city of Gao in what is now western Mali. Songhai converted to Islam during the 11th century and grew in prominence over the next few centuries before it was absorbed by the powerful Mali Empire in 1325.

Reclaiming its independence just half a century later, Songhai eventually rose to greatness in the late 15th century under the leadership of a fierce warrior known as Sonni Ali Ber who extended the empire deep into the Niger Valley. Songhai reached the height of its power in the early 16th century when the empire stretched from the Atlantic Ocean (present-day Senegal) to the center of present-day Nigeria and Niger. Songhai derived most of its power from trade and offered security and relative autonomy to conquered states in return for tribute.

Internal conflict gradually weakened the empire in the late 16th century. The death blow arrived in 1591 when Moroccan troops defeated the empire's forces and sacked its major cities. The remnants of the ruling Askia dynasty fled to what is now southern Niger and founded the small Dendi Kingdom.

Other Political Developments

As Songhai and Kanem-Bornu extended peripherally into the Niger Valley during the 15th century, political structures in other parts of Niger grew more complex.

The Agadez Sultanate: Tuareg nomads (see *Political and Social Relations*) first arrived in what is now northern Niger during the 11th century, and by the 15th century, they had established a sultanate at Agadez in the Aïr Mountains (Photo: Timia Valley, an oasis in the Agadez region of Niger). The Agadez Sultanate never functioned as a strong, centralized authority. Instead, the Sultans of Agadez mediated disputes between various Tuareg tribes and probably imposed a degree of control over regional trade routes.

Although there was plenty of infighting, the Tuaregs of the Aïr Mountains continued to recognize the Sultans at Agadez until 1750, when some tribes moved into the Azawagh basin and formed their own confederacy. By the time the French arrived in the late 19th century, there were 6 Tuareg confederations.

Hausa City-States: By the 14th century, the Hausa of present-day northern Nigeria and southern Niger had established 7 independent city-states. By the start of the 17th century, those city-states were able to expand their economic influence in part due to their favorable position at the terminus of north-south trade routes across the Sahara Desert.

Although many Hausa—especially those in urban areas—had adopted Islam by the 14th century, they tended to combine the faith with indigenous "animist" practices (see *Religion and Spirituality*). By the late 18th century, this "corrupted" form of Islam had grown but was criticized both internally and externally.

Usman dan Fodio: One of the loudest critics of the way Islam was practiced in the Hausa city-states was Usman dan Fodio, a Muslim scholar. In 1804, after two decades of proselytizing in the region, dan Fodio called upon "true" Muslims to join him in a ***jihad*** (holy struggle) against the form of Islam practiced in the Hausa city-states. His call was answered widely, and most of the Hausa city-states were incorporated into a newly created political structure known as the Sokoto Caliphate.

The Sokoto Caliphate: Based in what is now northern Nigeria, the Sokoto Caliphate consisted of several autonomous emirates that pledged allegiance to dan Fodio. At its high point in the mid-19th century, the Caliphate spanned from Téra, a city about 100 mi northwest of present-day capital city Niamey, to present-day Cameroon. It was at Téra that forces of the Zarma ethnic group, which had settled in what is now southwestern Niger during the 17th century, halted dan Fodio's advance (Photo: present-day Fulani inhabitants occupying Sokoto Caliphate area).

Damagaram: One state that successfully resisted dan Fodio and the Sokoto Caliphate was Damagaram, which was based at Zinder in what is now southern Niger. Founded in the 17th century by Hausa and Kanuri migrants and ruled mostly by Kanuri elite, Damagaram was a multi-ethnic polity with Tuareg, Fulani, Toubou, and Arab inhabitants. As Sokoto declined in the second half of the 19th century, Damagaram emerged as a powerful regional state.

Arrival of Europeans

European involvement in the interior of West Africa began in 1795 when British explorer Mungo Park (pictured) undertook his first of two expeditions in the Niger Valley. Park eventually reached present-day Niger during his second expedition in 1805. Heinrich Barth, a German explorer who worked for the British government, became the next European to traverse modern Niger when he explored the Sahara Desert in the early 1850s. In 1870, another German explorer named Gustav Nachtigal led an expedition from Libya to Lake Chad.

The writings of these early explorers, along with the need for a transit link between colonial possessions in other parts of Africa, prompted French and British interest in the region. They first delineated their respective spheres of influence on paper in the late 19th century, and the French soon followed up by dispatching a survey crew to the area in the early 1890s. It was during this expedition that the French signed their first treaties with local rulers.

In 1899, France sent an expedition of 2,000 men to take control of what is now Niger and thereby link French West Africa with French Congo. Known as the Voulet-Chanoine Mission, this expedition ultimately became known for the severe cruelty of its leaders, who massacred entire villages of indigenous people and eventually were murdered by their own troops. By 1903, most of present-day Niger was under the military control of the French, although Tuareg resistance in the North continued for another 2 decades.

Colonization

By 1908, the French began to establish an administrative structure to rule the territory that is now Niger. They did not have sufficient resources to administer the territory directly, so they sought to adapt preexisting local authorities for the purpose. To this end, the French created 7 ***cercles*** (districts), each divided into several ***secteurs*** (sectors). French military personnel, and later civilians, had authority over these administrative divisions.

Local authorities, by contrast, ruled over smaller subdivisions and had the titles ***chef de canton*** or ***chef de regroupement***. Their main duties on behalf of the French administration were to collect taxes and to conscript labor for public works projects. Nigeriens were given the status of ***sujets*** (subjects) and thus had little voice within the colonial system.

The Colony of Niger

With the creation of the Military Territory of Niger in 1912, the borders of modern Niger were first established. The territory was rechristened the Colony of Niger in 1922, and in the same year, the French shifted the capital from Zinder to Niamey. For the next 25 years, the French paid little attention to the colony. As the resources they had hoped to exploit never materialized, the French did not even build railways or paved roadways.

Due to this approach on the part of the French, the colonial era in Niger was characterized primarily by an expansion of Islam and an increase in cash crop cultivation. The French reluctantly promoted the expansion of Islam because Islamic values were closer to French thinking than those of indigenous faiths and because Islam had a recognizable legal and judicial system.

Although the French tried and failed to abolish slavery officially in the colony, they did use ***corvée***, a form of forced labor that closely resembled slavery. The French also levied heavy taxes on Nigeriens to fund their colonial enterprise, prompting many in the colony to move south into British-controlled Nigeria.

Independence

Following World War II, European colonial powers faced strong international pressure to move their overseas territories toward independence. In French colonies, this process began with the French constitution of 1946, which granted French citizenship and representation in the French National Assembly to colonial subjects. One decade later, the *loi-cadre* (Reform Act) of 1956 transferred new powers of self-government to the colonies.

In 1958, France allowed its colonies to choose by referendum between independence and continued association with France. According to the official tally, Nigeriens rejected independence, but many believe that France rigged the result in order to keep control of uranium discovered in 1957. The referendum's result was reversed just 2 years later when Niger declared its independence on August 3, 1960. Hamani Diori, a nationalist politician who had helped found the Progressive Party of Niger (PPN—*Parti Progressiste Nigerien*), became the first President.

President Hamani Diori

For the next 14 years, President Diori maintained close ties with France as he transformed Niger into a repressive, single-party state. Despite a weak economy, repeated coup attempts, and guerilla attacks by the exiled Sawaba political party, Diori and the PPN maintained their grip on power as Diori was reelected in 1965 and 1970. His downfall came after Niger suffered a series of droughts between 1968 and 1974. Accused of hoarding public food aid, Diori was deposed in a violent coup led by Lieutenant Colonel Seyni Kountché in April 1974.

Military Rule

Kountché established a military government that ruled Niger for 13 years. Contemptuous of the government he had replaced, Kountché made no effort to restore civilian rule. Nevertheless, his government was known for stability and a lack of corruption. The economy also improved under Kountché as the uranium discovered in the 1950s finally made it to market. The situation deteriorated in the 1980s as uranium prices tumbled and Nigeriens suffered through a lethal drought in 1983.

Ali Saibou: Kountché died in 1987 and was succeeded by Ali Saibou, his Chief of Staff, who dissolved the military regime. He won the presidential elections in 1989, running unopposed as the candidate for the newly created National Movement for a Developing Society (MNSD—*Mouvement National pour une Société de Développement*).

Most Nigeriens were not satisfied with Saibou's half-hearted attempts to liberalize politics. Students and union leaders, in particular, orchestrated demonstrations in support of multi-party rule and other reforms. In the North, tensions between the Tuareg and the government turned violent in 1990, marking the start of a rebellion that would engulf northern Mali and Niger.

Transition to Democracy

The Saibou regime was suspended in July 1991. After the adoption of a new constitution in 1993, Niger held free, multi-party elections for the first time, and Mahamane Ousmane (pictured) of the MNSD was elected President.

Under the Ousmane government, Niger faced a number of challenges: a weak economy, polarizing political infighting, and Tuareg rebellion. These difficulties were magnified in early 1994 by the devaluation of the CFA Franc, the currency used by Niger (see *Economics and Resources*). Ousmane's only real success was negotiating a peace accord with the Tuareg rebels in 1995.

After the results of 1995 elections essentially forced Ousmane to appoint his rival Hama Amadou as Prime Minister, political gridlock ensued, eventually leading to strikes and civil strife. Using this political turmoil as a pretext, Colonel Ibrahim Baré Maïnassara led a coup against Ousmane in January 1996.

Return to Military Rule

In an effort to establish the legitimacy of his rule, Maïnassara announced that he soon would articulate a new constitution and hold elections. In July 1996, Maïnassara won the elections, which were seen by most as blatantly fraudulent, and went on to develop a reputation for cruelty, corruption, and ineptitude.

In response, most single-country donors suspended foreign aid to Niger, while the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) tightened the already strict terms of their financial support (see *Economics and Resources*). As soldiers and civil servants stopped receiving regular paychecks, mutinies and strikes mounted. In April 1999, Maïnassara was murdered by Major Daoud Mallam Wanké, his head bodyguard.

The Tandja Era

Wanké acted swiftly to return Niger to civilian government. He created a National Reconciliation Council to pave the way for a new constitution and yet another round of elections. The new constitution was approved in mid-1999, and elections were held in November. The winner was Mamadou Tandja (pictured) of the MNSD.

First Term: The focus of Tandja's first term was to return Niger to sound fiscal footing. With the help of the IMF and the World Bank, he implemented the *Programme Spécial*, which focused on health and education. He also resumed regular salaries to government workers and decentralized some political powers. Credited with restoring political stability, he was reelected with 65.5% of the vote in a free and fair election in 2004.

Second Term: At the beginning of Tandja's second term, he made the unpopular move of levying a 19% Value Added Tax (VAT) on basic food products like wheat, milk, sugar, and rice. The VAT was ill-timed, as drought and a locust plague in 2004 caused a famine in Niger in 2005. Foreign relief was delayed as Tandja spent months denying the problem.

Renewed Rebellion: As the famine waned, Tandja faced the new problem of renewed rebellion by the Tuaregs, who felt that the government was not honoring the terms of the 1995 peace accord. Although 11,000 people were displaced, Tandja suppressed coverage of the conflict. A second peace accord was reached in 2009.

Coup: Under Niger's constitution, Tandja was required to step down at the end of his second term. Wanting to stay on, Tandja held an illegitimate referendum on August 4, 2009, that would have extended his term. Although the official result favored him due to an opposition boycott, Tandja had grown unpopular. On February 18, 2010, the military detained Tandja and removed him from power. A transition government administered the country until Mahamadou Issoufou (see *Political and Social Relations*) was elected President of Niger in January 2011.

The Origin of the Spirits

In contrast to history, which is supposed to be an objective record of the past based on verifiable facts, myth is a type of story that members of a culture use to embody their cultural values and to explain the origins of humans and the natural world. Myths are important because they provide a sense of heritage and identity to the cultures in which they originate.

Many Nigeriens believe that powerful but invisible spirits intervene positively and negatively in daily life (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Similarly, the members of the Hausa ethnic group share a myth that explains how those spirits came to be.

According to the myth, Adamu, the first man, and Hawa, the first woman, gave birth to 50 sets of twins. The Supreme Being that had created Adamu and Hawa asked to see the children. Afraid that the Supreme Being wanted to take the children, Adamu and Hawa hid the more beautiful twin of each set.

Being omniscient, the Supreme Being knew that he was being duped. He punished Adamu and Hawa by making the beautiful, hidden twins invisible forever, along with all their descendants, and it is those very same descendants who intervene to this day in the daily lives of the Hausa.

2. POLITICAL AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

Official Name

Republic of Niger
République du Niger (French)
Jumhuriyar Nijar (Hausa)

Political Borders

Algeria: 594 mi
Libya: 220 mi
Chad: 730 mi
Nigeria: 930 mi
Benin: 165 mi
Burkina Faso: 390 mi
Mali: 510 mi

Capital

Niamey

Demographics

Niger's population of 22.8 million (2020 est.) is growing at a rate of 3.66% per year, the 2nd highest rate in the world. The country's rapid population growth is enabled by the world's highest fertility rate, according to which the average Nigerien women will bear 7 children. With only 17% of its population living in cities, Niger is classified as a rural country. In recent years, however, the urban population has been growing at a rate of 4.27% per year. Similarly, since roughly half the population is under age 15, Niger is considered a young country.

Flag

Similar to the Indian flag, the Nigerien flag consists of three equal-width horizontal stripes of orange, white, and green having an orange circle centered in the white stripe. The circle represents the sun and the sacrifices made by the Nigerien people, while the color orange stands for northern Niger, which is dominated by the Sahara Desert. The green stripe represents Niger's verdant southern region, while white stands for purity and innocence.

Geography

About twice the size of Texas, Niger is a landlocked West African country that borders Algeria and Libya to the north, Chad to the east, Nigeria and Benin to the south, and Burkina Faso and Mali to the west. Niger is largely flat, with most of its territory lying 650-1,650 ft above sea level. Notable exceptions include the Djado Plateau, which rises 2,600-3,300 ft, and the Aïr Mountains in the north, which reach 7,218 ft at Mont Idoukal-n-Taghès, the highest point in Niger.

Bodies of Water: Apart from rare oases in the desert (pictured), Niger's primary bodies of water are the Niger River and Lake Chad. The Niger River cuts a 185-mi path through Niger's southwestern corner and is the main reason that agriculture is possible in the country. Lake Chad sits on Niger's southeastern border and has shrunk substantially since the mid-20th century.

Climate

Although Niger's climate is hot, dry, and dusty all year round, it varies slightly with the seasons. November through February constitute the cool season, when temperatures in the capital reach 85-95°F during the day and drop to 70°F at night. The hot season runs from March until May and brings hazy West African trade winds known as ***harmattan***. Temperatures in Niamey may exceed 110 °F during the day and drop to the mid-80s°F at night. The rainy season, lasting from June through September, brings some relief, as daytime temperature drop to 85°F.

Niger's climate also varies across three zones: desert, northern Sahelian, and southern Sahelian (the Sahel is a semiarid zone that extends across north central Africa and divides the Sahara Desert from the Sudanian savannas). The desert zone spans northern Niger and consists of rocky plains that receive about 4 inches of rain per year. The northern Sahelian zone stretches across central Niger and consists of savanna that receives 4-14 inches of rain-per-year and where livestock grazing is common. The southern Sahelian zone receives 14-24 inches of rain per year and is the center of Nigerien farming.

Natural Hazards

Niger suffers from an interrelated set of problems linked to poor soil quality and water shortages. Inferior farming techniques and overgrazing have led to soil erosion, while widespread reliance on wood fuel (see *Technology and Material*) has contributed to deforestation. Both issues amplify the preexisting problems of desertification and recurrent drought.

Government

The Republic of Niger divides administratively into 8 regions: Agadez, Diffa, Dosso, Maradi, Tahoua, Tillaberi, Zinder, and the capital district of Niamey. These regions divide further into 36 districts and 266 communes. Since attaining independence from France on August 3, 1960, Niger has had 7 constitutions, the most recent of which took effect in 2010.

Executive Branch

Incumbent President Mahamadou Issoufou (pictured) assumed office in April 2011 concurrent to Brigi Rafini becoming Prime Minister (PM). Elected by popular vote to serve a maximum of two 5-year terms, the President serves as chief-of-state and commander of the military. The PM acts as head-of-government and is chosen by the President who also selects 36 Cabinet members who are approved by the legislature.

Legislative Branch

Niger's legislature consists entirely of the 171-member National Assembly. Like the President, members of the legislature are elected by popular vote to serve 5-year terms.

Judicial Branch

Niger's legal system is a mix of formal law, which derives from the French legal system, and customary law, which is based on the traditional, unwritten practices of the indigenous population. Civil and criminal cases are usually tried in formal courts, while issues such as divorce and inheritance are often adjudicated in customary courts. All matters, however, can be appealed within the formal court system.

Political Climate

When Mahamadou Issoufou took office in 2011, it marked the completion of a messy transition that began when former President Mamadou Tandja refused to step down at the end of his second term (see *History and Myth*).

Defense

The Nigerien Armed Forces (FAN—*Forces Armées Nigeriennes*) consist of 5,300 active troops divided between an Army and an Air Force. The FAN has no Navy because Niger is landlocked. Despite lacking sufficient resources, the FAN is generally regarded as a competent and professional force. Its missions include maintaining Niger's territorial integrity, protecting national interests, aiding the National Police, countering small arms proliferation, and contributing to regional security. The FAN has participated in peacekeeping missions with the United Nations (UN), the African Union (AU), and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and it currently has forces deployed in Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

Consisting of 5,200 personnel, the Army comprises the majority of the FAN. Although technically separate, the 100-strong Air Force functions mainly as a transport service for the Army. Air Force equipment includes 2 combat capable aircraft, 6 reconnaissance craft, 7 transport craft, 2 attack helicopters, and 5 multi-role helicopters. Specialized Army assets include Chinese-made and French-made light armored vehicles, some artillery pieces, and an array of crew-served weapons.

Paramilitary Forces: With a joint strength of 5,400 personnel, Niger's paramilitary forces are responsible for law enforcement, border security, and augmenting the FAN. The National Police (1,500 personnel) are responsible for urban law enforcement, while the gendarmerie (1,400 personnel) performs that role in rural areas. The Republican Guard consists of 2,500 personnel. Like the FAN, the National Police lack sufficient resources, with less than one officer per 10,000 Nigeriens.

Nigerien Air Force Rank Insignia

All Enlisted | Private First Class | Corporal | Master Corporal | Sergeant | Master Sergeant | Warrant Officer

Chief Warrant Officer | 2nd Lieutenant | Lieutenant | Captain | Major | Lt Colonel | Colonel

Security

The most significant security threats facing Niger emanate from terrorist groups based in neighboring countries and, to a lesser extent, in Niger itself. Although not all of these terrorist groups operate in Niger, they represent a persistent threat of instability and are responsible for several negative side effects.

AQIM: Al-Qaeda in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is an Islamic jihadist group that seeks to overthrow the Algerian government and replace it with an Islamic caliphate. Although AQIM is not known for operating in Niger, it poses a security threat to the country in several ways. First, AQIM is known to operate through criminal organizations to conduct kidnappings for profit in Niger. Second, AQIM is thought to be working with Tuareg militant groups that operate in the Sahara Desert, from southern Algeria and Libya into northern Mali and Niger. Third, AQIM is known to train and finance other terrorist groups in the region, including Boko Haram and Harakat Ansar al-Din (Photo: AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukdal).

Boko Haram: Similar to AQIM, Boko Haram is a jihadist group that seeks to overthrow its national government and replace it with an Islamic regime. Based in northern Nigeria, Boko Haram has trained with AQIM and al-Shabaab, a Somalia-based al-Qaeda affiliate. Boko Haram is a threat to Niger because it has infiltrated the country and developed ties with local Muslims who are unhappy with the secular Nigerien government.

MNJ: The Niger Movement for Justice (MNJ—*Mouvement des Nigeriens pour la Justice*) is a rebel group that was founded at the start of the Tuareg rebellion of 2007-2009 (see *History and Myth*). The MNJ seeks greater rights for minorities in Niger and broader distribution of wealth, especially wealth derived from uranium mines in historically Tuareg-controlled lands. Although the MNJ agreed to a formal peace accord in 2009, it has continued to wage a low-level insurgency in the Aïr Mountains region. The targets of this insurgency have mostly been limited to military installations, uranium mines, and utility companies.

MNLA: The National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA—*Mouvement National pour la Libération de l'Azawad*) is a Tuareg separatist group based in Mali. In 2012, the MNLA declared the new state of Azawad in the northern half of Mali. Although the MNLA is a rival of AQIM and its operations so far have been confined to Mali, the Nigerien government remains concerned that the conflict will spill across the shared border.

Harakat Ansar al-Din: Like the MNLA, Harakat Ansar al-Din is a Mali-based Tuareg rebel group. Unlike the MNLA, Ansar al-Din is not a separatist movement and is an AQIM ally, meaning that conflict with the MNLA may occur and potentially spread to Niger.

Weapons Smuggling: Since the conclusion of the Libyan Civil War of 2011, weapons smuggling has presented a threat to Niger. This problem first became apparent when the FAN clashed with AQIM fighters who were armed with sophisticated weaponry that probably was stolen from Libyan armories. AQIM is not the only problem, however, as many Tuareg rebels fought on the side of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi and likely retained some advanced weaponry, which may embolden them to renew their conflict with the Nigerien government (Photo: An MNJ fighter).

Refugees: Over the past 2 decades, thousands of Malians have fled violent conflict in their home country to take refuge in neighboring states. According to current estimates, Niger hosts 58,051 Malian refugees. As Niger already faces difficulties in securing enough food for its own population, these refugees strain already stretched public services.

Regional Relations

As Tuareg uprisings have shown, ethnic conflict tends to spill across borders in West Africa. Consequently, Niger's relations with its 7 neighboring states are both challenging and somewhat unpredictable. Although regional groups like the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) allow for some degree of cooperation between West African states, recent events in Mali point out the limits of such bodies.

Niger's relations with neighbors range from friendly to tense. Niger maintains fairly close ties with Nigeria through extensive trade—legal and illegal—across their shared border. Niger also has had generally positive ties with Algeria since 1995, when Algeria helped arrange a peace accord between Niger and the Tuareg rebels (see *History and Myth*). However, those relations have been strained at times by insurgency and illicit activity on the shared border between the two countries. Border disputes have also led to tense relations with Chad, Burkina Faso, and Benin (Photo: Nigerien President Mahamadou Issoufou with Beninese President Yayi Boni).

Because of their common ethnic profile and shared problem of Tuareg rebellion, relations between Mali and Niger have been relatively close. However, this closeness was threatened when Niger refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of the coup in Mali in 2012. Relations between Libya and Niger deteriorated after the fall of Gaddafi in 2011, as Niger had been close to Gaddafi and supported his family during Libya's civil war.

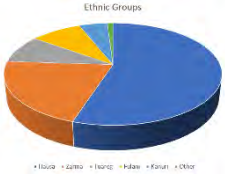
Niger-US Relations

Since attaining Independence, Niger's relationship with the US been generally positive, although frequent military coups have complicated matters. The Peace Corps operated in Niger from 1962 until 2011, when kidnappings by AQIM became a major threat to volunteers. The US helps Niger fight terrorism through the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP).

TSCTP

The Trans-Sahara region historically has served as a haven for illicit trade and, more recently, for terrorist activities conducted by some of the organizations described above. Capitalizing on the successful 2003 Pan-Sahel Initiative to neutralize terrorist safe havens in Africa, the US Department of State initiated the TSCTP with Exercise Flintlock in 2005, in which US special operations forces trained counterparts in 7 (now 12) Saharan countries on regional security and stability practices.

The main objective of the TSCTP is to deny terrorists the ability to move freely in the sparsely populated Sahara. The TSCTP also aims to facilitate cooperation on counterterrorism between Pan-Sahel countries (Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Mauritania, Mali, Niger), Maghreb allies (Algeria, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia), Senegal, and Nigeria.



Ethnic Groups

Nigerien ethnic groups divide broadly into nomadic pastoralists, such as the Tuareg and Fulani, and sedentary agriculturalists, like the Hausa, Zarma, and Kanuri. Most Nigeriens are agriculturalists, and even recently many pastoralists have shifted to agriculture or other subsistence methods as desertification has reduced the amount of suitable grazing lands.

Hausa: Comprising 55% of the population, the Hausa are the largest ethnic group in both Niger and Nigeria. Although they historically have been known as traders, the Hausa also have engaged in farming and producing handicrafts, especially with clay, leather, metals, and textiles. The group includes people of many different ethnic backgrounds who are united by a single language and an extensive history. The Hausa traditionally have been a feudal society, and since the 14th century at the latest they have been arranged politically into 7 autonomous city-states (see *History and Myth*).

Zarma: Along with the technically separate but closely related Songhai people, the Zarma ethnic group comprises 21% of the Nigerien population. Living mainly in southwestern Niger and along the Niger River, most Zarma are fisherman or sedentary agriculturalists. As they are the primary ethnic group in Niamey, the Zarma traditionally have been influential in Nigerien politics.

Tuareg: Calling themselves the ***kel tamashek***, or “speakers of Tamashek” (see *Language and Communication*), the Tuareg are nomads who traditionally inhabit northern Niger and Mali and southern Algeria. Comprising approximately 9% of Niger’s population, the Tuareg work mostly as traders or herders of camels, goats, and sheep. They group socially into tribes and clans which collectively form confederations led by chiefs.

The Tuareg historically make detailed social distinctions, even within the same clan, and each person has a defined place in society. In modern times, the status and privileges associated with "high" social class have disappeared to a large degree among the Tuareg.

Fulani: Also known as the Peul, the Fulani make up 9% of the population and live across a broad east-west swath of Niger's Sahelian zones. This wide dispersion is partly a consequence of their search for land on which to graze cattle, which are an important part of the Fulani way of life. Some Fulani have adopted agriculture as herds have shrunk in recent years.

Kanuri: Descended from the Empire of Kanem-Bornu (see *History and Myth*) and known to the Hausa as the Béri-béri, the Kanuri ethnic group encompasses 5% of Niger's population and inhabits the region east of Lake Chad. Although they initially were salt traders, the Kanuri now subsist on fishing, livestock herding, and agriculture.

Other Groups: People belonging to other ethnic groups comprise about 1% of Niger's population. Those other ethnic groups include the Toubou, who live on the border between Niger and Chad; the Gourmantché, who live between the Niger River and Burkina Faso; Arabs, who for the most part are Libyans; and Europeans, of whom most are French people living in Niamey.

Social Relations

Like the Tuareg, many Nigerien ethnic groups divide internally into classes or castes. In some cases, those classes or castes determine both occupation and potential spouses. Traditionally, the "higher" classes have been identified less by wealth than by certain external symbols, such as behavior, clothing, and jewelry. For example, members of higher classes traditionally have spoken in reserved tones in order to seem dignified. They also have tended to wear flowing textiles designed to complement a rotund figure. In the past, higher classes in some parts of the country even barred lower classes from wearing certain forms of ornamentation.

These traditional class distinctions remain strong in rural areas, although they have begun to erode in urban areas as a new sense of class has started to emerge. Marriage between different ethnic groups and social classes has become more common, and the rise of a money economy has eroded some of the traditional structures through which labor has been organized.

Slavery

Slavery has deep roots in Niger's history, beginning thousands of years ago—when slave caravans first passed through the region—and continuing into the 21st century. The French outlawed the slave trade at the beginning of the colonial era, and although the slave trade remained illegal when Niger gained independence, the government did not criminalize slavery itself until 2003 when it was forced to act by international outcry.

Despite the fact that slavery is now a crime, recent studies indicate that at least 43,000 people remain enslaved in Niger. Most of them are descendants of people captured hundreds of years ago and thus were born into slavery. Many slaves live in areas so isolated from modern life that it would never occur to them to question their servitude, and much less to know or suspect that freedom is their legal right.

Some slaves reportedly have rejected liberty on the basis that it would be a burden to live independently after spending their lives in captivity. For the most part, slavery continues due to physical coercion, social intimidation, and a lack of economic alternatives. In addition, the parts of Niger where slavery still exists are isolated, making it difficult for authorities to enforce the laws banning it.

3. RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

Overview

An estimated 98-99% of Nigeriens are Muslim. Although there were Christian missions throughout Niger during the colonial period, Christians—both Protestants and Catholics—account for less than 2% of the population and live mainly in urban areas. Despite their Islamic faith, many Nigeriens incorporate pre-Islamic beliefs and practices into their religious lives, while some follow those traditional beliefs and practices exclusively. Since the constitution protects religious freedom, consequently, both Christian and Islamic holy days are recognized as public holidays (Photo: A mosque in Niger).

Muslim Faith

Origins of Islam

Islam dates to the 6th century AD, when Muhammad, whom Muslims consider God's final Prophet, was born in Mecca 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 lifelong 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. Sunni Muslims are distinguished by their belief that the leader (***Caliph***) of the Muslim community (***Ummah***) should be elected. Most of Niger's Muslims are Sunni Muslims. Conversely, Shi'a Muslims, who account for a small percentage of Niger's Muslims, believe the ***Caliph*** should be a direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad.

Sufi Tradition: Characterized by mysticism and ritualistic prayer, many who follow the Sufi tradition belong to religious brotherhoods (see "Islam" below) whose members follow the teachings of their spiritual leaders. Adhering to Sunni tradition, Sufis are not fundamentalists.

Five Pillars of Islam

There are five 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 facing the Ka'aba in Mecca. The Ka'aba is seen as the center of the Muslim world and a unifying focal point for Islamic worship (Photo: US Marine at the Ka'aba in 2012).

- **Charity (*Zakat*):** Donate alms, 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 (*Hajj*):** Perform the pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia, at least once in a lifetime.

Shared Perspectives

Many Islamic tenets parallel those of two other major religions, namely Judaism and Christianity. In fact, Muslims consider Christians and Jews "people of the Book," referring to biblical scriptures, because they also share their monotheistic belief in one God.

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

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 the completion of previous revelations to Jewish and Christian prophets. However, Muslims believe Jews and Christians altered God's word and that Muhammad received God's true revelation (Pictured: Qur'an page from 8th century North Africa).

Jesus: The three religions differ significantly in their understanding of the role of Jesus. While Christians consider Him the divine Messiah who fulfills the Jewish scriptures, Jews are still waiting for the Messiah to come. Muslims consider Jesus a prophet, but they neither acknowledge the Christian view of His divinity nor believe in the Christian Trinity.

View of Death: Muslims believe that the time of both birth and death is determined by Allah, or God. While people grieve the loss of friends and family members, they do not see death itself as a negative event, as Muslims believe that a person who lived a good life lives on in Heaven.

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 violence and notions of "holy war" that often are associated with the term. Most Muslims strongly oppose terrorism and consider it contrary to Islamic beliefs.

Ramadan

Ramadan is a month-long time for inner reflection, self-control, and focus on God. During this time, Muslims who are physically able are required to 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, one learns to appreciate the good in life. It is common for Muslims to break their fast at sunset with a light snack followed by prayer and dinner. Meals during Ramadan tend to be more elaborate than those at other times of year.

Known in Niger as ***Carême*** (the French word for Catholic Lent), Ramadan is emphasized strongly because it is the most visible of all religious duties. Muslims who do not fast during Ramadan are criticized by friends, family, and neighbors. Consequently, even less-observant Muslims fast for Ramadan, when they also tend to behave piously and follow Islamic law more closely.

Ramadan is observed during the 9th month of the Islamic calendar (see *Time and Space*) and is anchored in three holy days, one of which occurs later in the Islamic year:

- ***Lailat ul-Qadr***, also known as "The Night of Power," marks Muhammad's receipt of the first verses of the Qur'an.
- ***Eid al-Adha***, known as the "Festival of Sacrifice," celebrates Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son, Ishmael (or Isaac, according to the Christian faith), to prove his loyalty to God. It is celebrated about 2 months after Ramadan on the same day the annual ***Hajj*** ends.
- ***Eid al-Fitr***, known as the "Festival of Fast-Breaking," is a 3-day festival celebrated at Ramadan's end.

The History of Islam in Niger

Arabs involved in trans-Saharan trade (see *History and Myth*) first brought Islam to Niger in the 9th century. As Hausa city-states began to grow in the 10th century, more trade routes opened and Islam pushed south. By the 14th century most Hausa had adopted Islam, although many Hausa continued to incorporate traditional beliefs and practices into their Islamic worship (see "Traditional Beliefs"). In the 19th century, Usman Dan Fodio, an Islamic scholar who opposed the Hausa interpretation of Islam, conducted a holy war against the Hausa city-states and created the Islamic Sokoto Empire. The Empire eventually declined as it clashed with forces from the Tuareg and Zarma ethnic groups (see *History and Myth*). When Europeans arrived in the late 19th century, many of the region's inhabitants were Muslim (Pictured: Fulani ***marabouts***, or Islamic scholars, study manuscripts in the early 20th century).

Religion Today

Traditional Beliefs

Before adopting Islam, most Nigeriens practiced animism, the belief that spirits inhabit natural objects such as rivers and trees and influence human existence. Despite identifying as Muslims, many Nigeriens today maintain a similar animistic worldview. They believe natural objects are sacred and deserve respect—a belief that connects them closely to the natural environment. Consequently, foreign nationals should ask permission before cutting trees, gathering wild plants, or hunting animals.

Although traditional beliefs and practices vary among groups, many Nigeriens share a belief that spirits or spiritual forces can intervene in the lives of humans to grant health and fortune or, conversely, sickness and hardship. Some Zarma-Songhai, Hausa, Fulani, and Tuareg groups, for example, believe that certain spirits choose certain individuals to intercede with humans on behalf of the spirits(see “Spirit Possession”).

In line with their assimilated beliefs, many Nigeriens identify the spirits of traditional animism with ***djinns***—spirits or genies that are mentioned in the Qur’an. Consequently, some Nigeriens who believe they have been possessed by a ***djinn*** visit Islamic scholars specializing in exorcism. Nevertheless, not all Muslims approve of the associated exorcism rites. Other Nigeriens wear amulets to ward off evil spirits or consult with natural healers to find cures for their ailments (see *Sustenance and Health*).

By contrast, many inhabitants of the Mawri sub-group of the Hausa ethnic group adhere exclusively to traditional beliefs and worship spirits known as ***bori***, which they believe inhabit the countryside. The Mawri also perform rituals meant to alleviate conflict and renew ties between humans and spirits. For some Mawri, adherence to these traditions is an act of resistance to Islam and its history of suppressing traditional beliefs and practices (Photo: Wodaabe men dressed to perform at a festival).

Spirit Possession

Although spirit possession ceremonies in Niger vary by local tradition, they are typically public events that draw large crowds of onlookers and involve singing, dancing, and music-making. Attendees usually hire musicians, prepare food, and in some cases, make transportation arrangements for out-of-town guests.

For the Mawri community of Dogondoutchi, bush spirits or ***bori*** affect the daily lives of humans, bringing both good and bad fortune. Followers of the ***bori*** channel their spiritual power to assist in healing, influence rainfall, prevent famine, and otherwise intervene in the community's daily affairs. Spirits choose and possess their hosts for a lifetime, although they only appear and communicate through their hosts during ceremonies known as ***wasani***.

During Songhai possession dances, musicians play a ***godji***, or violin. Carved from a gourd and covered by a lizard skin, the ***godji*** has only a single string—a horse hair—that is plucked with a bow to produce a high-pitched sound that resembles a human wail.

Among the Kel Ewey Tuareg, possession is only appropriate for unmarried girls and for women with grown children. During possession rituals, the spirit medium remains seated and stationary apart from strictly choreographed head motions.

With Sufi revitalization and Islamic reform having swept across Niger (see "Islam" below), Islamic leaders have condemned spirit possessions—both for purposes of healthcare (see *Sustenance and Health*) and a source of entertainment—as evil and corrupt. Similarly, those leaders have identified accompanying singing, dancing, and drumming as un-Islamic traditions that should be purged.

Islam

About 95% of Niger's Muslims are Sunni and about 5% are Shi'a. Some Sunnis align with Sufi brotherhoods such as the Quadiriyya and Tijaniyya, which are less orthodox forms of Islam that place importance on mysticism, ritual simplicity, and the individual's relationship with God.

Most Nigeriens hold moderate views and tolerate other faiths, although Muslims in Hausaland and the eastern part of the country tend to be more conservative than those in the west. Observant Nigerien Muslims consume neither pork nor alcohol. Some observant Muslim women in Hausaland live in seclusion, leaving the home only in the accompaniment of their children or their husbands—a practice that emerged during a period of Arabization in the colonial era.

Many rites-of-passage in Niger are connected to Islam (see *Family and Kinship*). A ***marabout*** (Islamic scholar), for example, is a fundamental part of a ***baptème***, or baby naming ceremony. In addition, Nigeriens generally follow Islamic burial customs and some participate in polygynous marriage arrangements (see *Family and Kinship*).

Religion and Education: From age 6, many Nigerien Muslim children attend Qur'anic schools in which they learn about the practices and morals of Islam and memorize Qur'anic verses in Arabic by writing them on wooden boards (pictured).

Changing Islamic Beliefs and Practices

For many years after Independence, both military and civilian regimes in Niger used the Islamic Association of Niger (IAN)—the only officially sanctioned Islamic association—to legitimize their control. The IAN disdained Sufi orders and suppressed reformist Islamist movements. The establishment of multi-party politics in 1990 fundamentally changed the religious landscape as both the Sufi orders and Islamist organizations capitalized on the political liberalization that ensued. Today there are more than 50 sanctioned Islamic associations. Although most Muslim leaders in Niger emphasize religious commonalities, disputes between Muslim groups occasionally flare.

Izala: The early 1990s also brought a wave of Islamic revivalism. Founded in 1978 in neighboring Nigeria, the Wahhabist-inspired Society for the Removal of Innovation and the Restoration of Tradition (Izala movement) stood steadfast as a vocal critic of prevailing Islamic beliefs and practices in both Niger and Nigeria that were "tainted" by local traditions. The movement is strongest in Hausaland, where leaders seek to detach traditional African beliefs and ceremonies from "true" Islam, challenge the authority of local elders, and support the spread of Islam through education. Izala leaders also promote moral discipline, self-restraint, and frugality.

Sufi Orders: Sufi orders responded by denouncing conflict, promoting their followers active participation in political life, and supporting legal reforms to improve the situation of women and children while still adhering to Islamic doctrine. Some educated women have taken on high-profile public roles since the 1990s, promoting Islamic learning in their communities and launching social initiatives.

Fundamentalist Islamic Organizations: Reports suggest that fundamentalist Islam may be replacing Sufism in some areas along Niger's borders. In the West, militants linked to al-Qaeda have infiltrated the country in search of recruits. In the South, a Nigeria-based Islamist militia known as Boko Haram ("Western teachings are sinful"—see *Political and Social Relations*) has found some Nigerien followers and has publicly threatened Muslim ***imams*** (worship leaders) who denounce its ideology.

Religion and the Law

The constitution guarantees religious freedom and provides for the separation of church and state. The government is committed to avoiding religious or ethnic incitement and opposes inflammatory preaching, whether by Muslim clerics or by Christian missionaries. The Islamic-Christian Relations Commission sponsors training sessions on interfaith dialogue (Photo: Nigerien Minister of Religious Affairs Issaka Labo in 2008).

4. FAMILY AND KINSHIP

Overview

In a country with a harsh environment and limited employment prospects, families serve as mutual support networks that are essential to individual survival. Many aspects of Nigerien family life are derived from Islamic tradition.

Residence

Residence spaces, patterns, and structures vary between rich and poor, urban and rural, and nomadic and sedentary.

Rural: There are two main types of dwellings found in rural areas: tents and ***bukkas*** (huts). Tents, which are collapsible structures made from grasses and animal hides, are most common among nomads. They are designed to be moved quickly and frequently and thus are furnished lightly. ***Bukkas***, by contrast, are stationary structures with walls made of straw or adobe, a mixture of clay and straw. They consist of a windowless, circular room covered by a conical roof. In larger villages, some Nigeriens live in rectangular adobe houses.

Urban: Most urban Nigeriens live in rented, rectangular adobe houses with one to several rooms. Most urban homes have packed dirt or concrete floors and a 3-layer roof that consists of wood, straw, and an outer layer of clay. Some foreign nationals and wealthy Nigeriens live in expensive French-style dwellings known as ***villas***, which have amenities—such as electricity and running water—that are relatively rare in most Nigerien homes.

Patterns: Nigerien residences tend to cluster into compounds. In Hausa communities, compounds are organized around the home of a father whose sons live with their wives in adjacent homes. Tuareg compounds are organized more closely around nuclear families, although extended families live close together. Many urban compounds are not kin-based at all, as unrelated families often live in the same compound while members of the same extended family live far away from each other.

Family Structure

Most ethnic groups in Niger are patriarchal, meaning that men control most aspects of society, including family life; patrilineal, meaning that descent is traced through males; and patrilocal, meaning that newlyweds live in close proximity to the family of the husband. Accordingly, men serve as heads of household in Nigerien society, and members of extended families combine their resources and efforts under the guidance of those men.

Both the nuclear and extended family structures are central to Nigerien culture, as they provide an important mutual support network in a harsh environment. Younger family members are expected to support the elderly, who are highly revered, while wealthier family members are expected to help their relatives in need, regardless of how well they know those family members.

Polygyny: Polygyny, or the practice of men having multiple wives at the same time, is both legal and common in Niger. It is more common among sedentary communities than nomadic communities, probably due to the influence of Islamic law (see *Religion and Spirituality*), which allows men to have up to 4 wives at a time. Since many men cannot afford to support multiple wives, the practice is declining in urban areas.

Children

Nigeriens consider children an expression of God's blessing and typically believe that childless couples are cursed. Given the social pressure that men experience to produce offspring, women who do not produce children lose society's respect and risk their husband's divorcing them.

Many Nigerien women begin having children before age 18 and are encouraged to have as many children as possible. Perhaps due partly to this emphasis on childbirth, Niger has the world's highest fertility rate, and Nigerien women can expect to bear more than 6 children during their lives. Since most children begin to work in the household at age 7, there is also an economic incentive to have as many children as possible.

Nigerien parents are considered responsible for their children until marriage and sometimes even beyond. In return, children are expected to obey their parents and to take care of them in their old age. Children are seen as belonging to the community, so neighbors may discipline a child whose parents are not around.

Birth: Nigeriens traditionally do not discuss a pregnancy before the child has been born for fear it will bring bad luck. After the birth, the mother and child spend 40 days in seclusion, as Nigeriens believe that the mother is surrounded by evil spirits during this period. The seclusion period also allows the mother to rest. Female relatives handle household chores (see *Sex and Gender*) during this recovery phase, and it is common for the new mother to spend time at her parents' home. After the seclusion period passes, the mother dresses up to receive gifts from friends and family. In addition, sacrifices of millet and sugar are made to God in thanks for the healthy birth.

Childhood: Babies are kept in close proximity to their mothers and usually are carried in a sling on the mother's back. Infants are weaned at age 2-3, after which female siblings have most responsibility for their care. Nigerien toddlers are not disciplined very stringently and generally are allowed to explore their environment with relative freedom.

Rites of Passage

Nigeriens observe the following rites-of-passage ceremonies to mark the various stages of life.

Baby-Naming Ceremony

Occurring one week after a child's birth, the ***baptème***, or name day, is a ceremony in which the Qur'anic name of a Nigerien child is revealed. It usually begins early in the morning, when the head of household slaughters a sheep and then gives the meat to family and friends. One or more ***marabouts*** (Muslim holy men—see *Religion and Spirituality*) then announce the child's name. Later, the women of the child's household cook food and distribute it to friends and family, while the mother receives gifts such as money, soap, and baby clothes.

Marriage

Marriage is an essential rite of passage for Nigeriens. For both sexes, marriage confers elevated social status. Consequently, most Nigeriens get married as it is considered improper for a girl to remain single. Although marrying before age 15 is illegal, the country has high child marriage rates: about 25% of girls marry by age 15 and about 75% marry by age 18. Families often accept child marriage because it secures their daughter's future while also providing bridewealth.

Bridewealth: Bridewealth is a sum paid by the groom's family to that of the bride in order to consolidate friendly relations and to compensate for the loss of the bride's presence and labor. Negotiating bridewealth is a major aspect of wedding preparations in Niger, and marriages are not seen as valid until part of the bridewealth has been paid. Bridewealth may include items such as jewelry, clothing, perfume, livestock, and money.

Spouse Selection: Arranged marriages still occur in Niger, although the practice is declining. Young Nigeriens typically can suggest or reject matches but usually do not marry against the wishes of their family. Young, educated Nigeriens increasingly are free to select their own spouses. Due to its reduced likelihood of divorce, cousin marriage is experiencing a revival in Niger as a result of social pressure from the family.

Divorce: Divorce is common and acceptable in Niger. When a young woman divorces her husband after an arranged marriage, she generally is considered mature and free to choose her next spouse. After divorce, the father retains custody of the children.

Death

In line with Islamic tradition, deceased Nigeriens are washed and wrapped in a shroud shortly after death. The remains are then buried in a cemetery with the head pointing toward Mecca (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Following burial, mourners visit the home of the deceased and offer a ***fatiya*** (prayer). During the subsequent mourning period, the widow is secluded and must follow a strict set of mourning practices.

5. SEX AND GENDER

Overview

Nigerien men and women generally have separate, defined roles and generally consider those roles complementary rather than unequal. However, due to the ramifications of customary law, women who do see their own situation as unfair or harmful often find it difficult to assert their legal rights.

Gender Roles and Work

There is a distinct division of labor between the genders in Nigerien society. Women are responsible for duties inside the home, such as preparing meals and caring for children and elders. Rural women also are responsible for physically demanding tasks outside the home, such as crushing grain, building and tending cooking fires, retrieving firewood and well water, and working the fields with their husbands during the rainy season. Some women in rural Niger work as many as 17 hours-per-day, usually without pay, and some older women may seek to supplement family income by selling cloth, household goods, or prepared foods on the street.

Most Nigerien men work in agriculture, the dominant sector of Niger's economy (see *Economics and Resources*), although some men undertake more specialized careers as blacksmiths, leatherworkers, or woodworkers. In addition, some men have secondary jobs as clerics, traders, or musicians. Both men and women work in the civil service as administrators, policemen, teachers, doctors, and nurses, among other roles.

Gender and Politics

Due to the quota increase in 2015, Nigerien political parties must allot at least 17% of their elected positions to women. Women now hold 29 of 171 seats in Niger's National Assembly (see *Political and Social Relations*), a level lower than the 24% held by women in the US House of Representatives. Women also hold 6 of 36 posts (17%) in Niger's Cabinet.

Gender and the Law

The Nigerien legal system is a blend of “statutory” law, which is based on French civil law, and “customary” law framed in the unwritten norms of indigenous Nigeriens (see *Political and Social Relations*). Although statutory law takes precedence over customary law, the latter system is used often to address issues of family law and tends to be biased against women.

For example, although statutory laws establish equal rights for men and women in family life, traditional family codes require that wives obey their husbands. In some ethnic groups, a wife receives only 1/4 of her husband’s estate if he dies without an heir, while the remainder goes to the husband’s family. In other ethnic groups, daughters are not allowed to inherit land.

Rape and Gender-Based Violence

Violence against women is a major problem in Niger. It is both common and socially acceptable for husbands and other male family members to physically abuse female family members. Rape is a crime punishable by 10-30 years in prison, although it often goes unreported. Furthermore, it is taboo for a woman to talk openly about physical abuse, especially when the perpetrator is her husband. Although Niger has laws designed to protect women, many women are not aware of their legal rights. Other women cannot afford to assert them or fear community reprimand or further abuse by their spouse.

Sex and Procreation

Since most Nigeriens are Muslims, their attitudes about sex generally reflect Islamic beliefs (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Accordingly, most Nigeriens consider sexual relations as a private matter appropriate only within the context of marriage. Virginity and fidelity are valued highly, especially among women. Since some parents still arrange marriages in Niger (see *Family and Kinship*), dating is less common than in Western countries.

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

FGM is a procedure for deliberately modifying a woman's sex organ in order to reduce her ability to experience sexual pleasure. Proponents of FGM consider it a way to discourage women from premarital sex and infidelity. Although Niger's overall FGM rate is low and decreasing—from 5% in 1998 to 2% in 2012—the procedure is widespread among some ethnic groups in western Niger, where 2/3 of women are affected. A Nigerien law passed in 2003 outlawed FGM and established a penalty of 6 years in prison for the offender, or 20 years in prison if the victim dies.

Homosexuality

Although homosexuality is legal in Niger, it is considered culturally and socially unacceptable. Consequently, few gay Nigeriens openly disclose their sexual orientation. There is a statute that provides for up to 3 years imprisonment and 10,000 CFA francs ($200) in fines for any person who engages in an "unnatural" same-sex act with someone under age 21.

Colonization, Islam, and Women

Although modern Nigerien women are treated like second-class citizens in many ways, traditionally, women occupied important positions in the past. Female leaders such as Kasai, a 16th century Songhai princess, and Sarraounia Mangou, a 19th century Hausa queen, are still well known today, and female priests played notable ritualistic roles among pre-colonial Hausa and Zarma-Songhai groups.

The position of women began to change at the dawn of the colonial era, when the French administration promoted patriarchal Islamic values over indigenous customs lacking written laws. The spread of Islamic values quickly eroded the position of women. Whereas both sexes once shared equal control over family and property, Islam shifted power to men and thereby made it nearly impossible for women to amass wealth independently.

6. LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

Language Overview

Although French is the official language of Niger, less than 1/5 of the population speaks the language. Most Nigeriens speak an indigenous language, of which the most widely spoken are Hausa, Zarma, Fula, Tamashek, and Kanuri. Many Nigeriens also read and write Arabic, although few speak the language because they learned it primarily for religious purposes while attending Qur'anic schools (see *Religion and Spirituality*).

Indigenous Languages

All Nigeriens grow up speaking one of Niger's 21 indigenous languages, which represent 3 of Africa's 4 language families. Despite this variety, 85% of Nigeriens speak one of the top 3 indigenous languages: about 76% of Nigeriens speak either Hausa or Zarma while about 9% speak Tamashek, the language of the Tuareg. Additionally, 9% speak Fula, the language of the Fulani and 5% Kanuri. The rest of the country's indigenous languages—including Gourmanchema, Tasawag, Tagdal, and Tedaga—all have fewer than 30,000 speakers. As most regions of Niger have been and remain zones of contact between different people, many Nigeriens are multilingual.

Hausa: Hausa is West Africa's most widely spoken language and is spoken as a first language by slightly more than half of Nigeriens. Hausa is the primary language of eastern Niger and also is used as a *lingua franca* between Nigeriens who do not have the same first language.

Linguists classify Hausa as a member of the Chadic group of the Afro-Asiatic language, implying that Hausa is more closely related to Arabic, Hebrew, and Berber than to most other sub-Saharan African languages. The influence of Islam upon Hausa is evident in both the language's vocabulary and in its literary tradition, which dates back to several centuries before contact with Western cultures (see "Ancient Scripts of Niger" textbox).

Ancient Scripts of Niger

Throughout the region's history, people developed different scripts to record the respective languages. The Tuareg, for example, developed a system known as ***Tifinagh*** to document their Tamashek language. As one of the world's oldest scripts, ***Tifinagh*** traces its origins to 3,000-year-old engravings found in the Sahara Desert that depict animals, utensils, and other objects. The shapes of these engravings gradually evolved to become geometric forms that represent language. Today, many Tuareg use a modern form of this ancient writing system.

Another script that historically has had significance in Niger is ***ajami***, a modified form of Arabic script used to write a number of West African languages (see *Learning and Knowledge*). ***Ajami*** traces its roots to the 9th century, when Islam was introduced and Qur'anic schools began teaching Arabic. Members of the Hausa and Fulani ethnic groups adapted the Arabic script to write their own languages, resulting in the creation of ***ajami***. Although the government has sponsored ***ajami*** publications, the script is used mainly by scholars and in certain Qur'anic schools. Today most Nigeriens writing in Hausa use ***Boko***, a Latin-based script that emerged in the 1950s.

Zarma: Sometimes called Djerma or Songhai-Zarma, Zarma is spoken by about 21% of Nigeriens, mainly in the West. Zarma belongs to the Songhai group of the Nilo-Saharan language family and is also spoken in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Benin.

Tamashek: Spoken by the nomadic Tuareg of northern Niger, Tamashek or Tamajaq is the main language spoken in the Aïr Mountains region. Tamashek belongs to the Berber group of the Afro-Asiatic family and is also spoken in Algeria and Mali.

French and English

As the official language of Niger and the primary language of instruction in Nigerien schools (see *Learning and Knowledge*), French is widely spoken in urban areas and is commonly used by the government and media. Because many Nigeriens have little formal education, however, their French is often poor.

Nigeriens who do speak French often are called ***éduqués*** or ***diplomés***, terms that explicitly denote their higher educational attainment. Although most schools in Niger teach English as a foreign language, relatively few Nigeriens speak the language. Those who do are employed primarily in the country's tourism industry (see *Economics and Resources*).

Communication Overview

Communicating competently in Niger requires not only knowledge of French, Hausa, or other languages, but also the ability to interact effectively using those languages. This notion of competence includes paralanguage (volume, rate of speech, intonation), nonverbal forms of communication (personal space, touch, gestures), and interaction management (conversation initiation, turn-taking, and termination). When used appropriately, these aspects of communication ensure that statements are interpreted as the speaker intends.

Communication Style

Nigeriens consider the ability to convey trustworthiness and respect an essential component of effective communication. They cultivate this attribute by observing formal, elaborate greeting rituals and outwardly maintaining a disposition of calm and stoic pleasantness, which is known to the Hausa as ***fara'a***.

Social status in Niger is determined to a large degree by the ability to maintain a dignified and respectful attitude toward others in social situations (see *Political and Social Relations*). Nigeriens believe people should ideally be reserved and quiet, denying their personal needs if others have greater needs and enduring hardship and pain without complaint.

The Communication Process

All interactions begin with greetings. Even Nigeriens who want to ask a simple question must begin with a proper greeting, as otherwise their fellow Nigeriens would be offended. Nigeriens generally maintain slightly less than an arm's length of personal space during conversations, although this space is greater between unrelated members of opposite sexes and smaller between friends and family. Friends of the same sex sometimes hold hands or otherwise touch while chatting as a sign of close friendship.

Direct eye contact during conversations is acceptable and expected in most situations, although women often avoid eye contact with men while in public. Similarly, Nigeriens of lesser social status may avoid direct eye contact when interacting with elders, local leaders, or others of high social status (see *Political and Social Relations*).

Greetings

Greetings tend to be lengthy in Niger, usually consisting of a standard yet friendly set of inquiries about health and family that must be answered before the "real" conversation begins. For example, a Nigerien may begin a greeting by saying the equivalent of "Peace be with you," and then ask how the day has gone, how work is going, and how the family is (see "Useful Translations"). All these questions must be answered in the positive before speakers "get down to business." The content of the answers is not nearly as important as their delivery, which must be good-natured and enthusiastic.

Gestures: Gestures and handshakes are an important part of greetings. Many Nigeriens shake hands upon meeting, and the handshake itself is simply a loose squeeze that may be held for the duration of the greeting. When greeting someone of high social standing, Nigeriens may lightly touch the underside of their right forearm with their left hand during a handshake or touch their right hand over their heart after a handshake. Foreign nationals should be mindful of minimizing the use of the left hand during social interactions (see *Time and Space*).

To beckon others, Nigeriens point their palm to the ground and curl their fingers inward. Foreign nationals are advised that Nigeriens indicate the numeral 5 not by raising all 5 fingers on one hand—which is a rather insulting gesture—but by bringing all fingertips of one hand together to touch the top of the thumb.

While greeting each other, Nigerien women may shake hands, exchange kisses on the cheek, or raise their hands to the sides of their faces. People of different sexes generally avoid physical contact upon meeting and instead simply nod or verbally greet each other. Foreign nationals generally should wait to offer a handshake to a Nigerien of the opposite sex until the Nigerien has initiated contact.

Forms of Address

Although it was rare in the past for Nigeriens to address each other by name, Nigeriens today refer to each other by name if they are of equal social standing. As in the past, however, titles and terms of relationship or occupation—such as “old mother,” “director,” and “fish seller,”—are common, and foreign nationals are advised to address Nigeriens by title and last name and to ask permission before using a Nigerien’s first name.

French titles such as ***madame***, ***mademoiselle***, and ***monsieur*** are popular among educated Nigeriens, while rural Nigeriens may indicate a similar level of respect by using the title ***Muche***, the Hausa equivalent of ***monsieur***. The titles ***al-Haji*** (men) and ***al-Hajiya*** (women) are also commonly used. In a strict sense, these titles indicate that the bearer has made a ***hajj*** (pilgrimage to Mecca—see *Religion and Spirituality*). Since it requires great wealth to complete the ***hajj***, both titles are also commonly used to refer to any wealthy person, whether or not he has made the ***hajj***.

Language Training Resources

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

Useful Translations

English	French	Hausa
Peace be with you (greeting)/ Amen, and also with you (response)	Bonjour (good day)	Salama alaikum/Amin, alaikum salam
Hello!	Salut!/Allô!	Sannu!
(Response to Hello)		Sannu kadai!
Good morning. How are you? /How did you sleep?	Bonjour. Comment allez-vous?	Ina kwana?
Good afternoon/ How did your day go?	Bonjour	Ina ini?
I'm fine/My health is good	Bien, merci.	Lahiya lau
Goodbye/May we sleep in health	Au revoir	Mu kwana lahiya
My name is…	Je m'appelle …	Sunana…
What is your name (male/female)?	Comment vous appelez-vous?	Mi sunanka?/Mi sunanki?
See you later	À plus tard	Sai anjima
See you tomorrow	À demain	Sai gobe
I don't understand	Je ne comprends pas	Ban gane ba
How much is…?	Combien…?	Nawa ne…?
Where?	Où?	Ina?
I want…	Je veux…	Ina son…
Thank you!	Merci!	Sannu! Na gode!
You're welcome	De rien	Ba kome
Today	Aujourd'hui	Yau
Yesterday	Hier	Jiya
Tomorrow	Demain	Gobe
Later on	Plus tard	In an jima
I'm sorry	Désolé/Excusez-moi	Yi hak'uri
Okay!	Ça va!/Bien!	To!
Yes	Oui	I
No	Non	A'a

7. LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE

Literacy

- Total population over age 15 who can read and write: 19.1%
- Male: 27.3%
- Female: 11% (2015 estimate)

Traditional Education

Although traditional approaches to education vary across ethnic groups, all Nigeriens use similar means to educate children about the history, customs, and values of their cultures. Some of the most common means of imparting knowledge include telling stories, singing songs, and reciting poems. These methods are used to instill values ranging from sharing and generosity to respect for elders. Nigeriens also hold ceremonies to celebrate rites of passage and prepare children for adult society (see *Family and Kinship*).

Nigerien children are segregated by sex at a young age so that they can serve as apprentices to same-gender parents or older relatives. Girls learn how to perform domestic duties, while boys learn skills associated with their social background such as farming, herding, woodworking, and leatherworking.

Early Islamic Education: Formal instruction came to what is now Niger after the 9th century, when Arab traders first arrived in the region (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Those traders and their religious leaders established formal schools because they wanted to spread their Islamic faith among the local population.

In order to aid that process, Islamic scholars eventually devised ***ajami***, a modified form of Arabic script that can be used to write African languages (see *Language and Communication*). By the 18th century, Niger had several schools where principles from the Qur'an and other religious texts were taught using ***ajami***. To this day, some Nigeriens still use ***ajami*** to read and write the Hausa language.

Formal Education

After establishing the Colony of Niger in the early part of the 20th century (see *History and Myth*), the French introduced their model of formal education to Niger and mandated French as the language of instruction. The French tried to use this education system to immerse Nigeriens in French thinking and assimilate them into French culture. The project largely failed, however, because the French devoted too few resources.

Although Niger gained independence from France in 1960 (see *History and Myth*), the education system continued to follow the French model. There was a notable modification in the emergence of Franco-Arabic schools offering a curriculum that combined secular and religious instruction.

Modern Challenges

Niger's education system faces several challenges. Expected length of school attendance is low—about 6 years for boys and 5 years for girls—while dropout and repetition rates are high. The student-to-teacher ratio is also high, as multiple grades are often taught in one classroom. Frequent teacher strikes only worsen the situation. Attendance levels are erratic, as many students must work during harvest season. Girls are vulnerable to sexual harassment and assault by male teachers, and some parents prefer to keep girls home so they can help with chores.

Many schools are in poor physical condition and lack even basic amenities such as toilets, potable water, and electricity. Moreover, the ability of the Nigerien government to improve the country's educational infrastructure is limited by the perpetual budgetary constraints impacting Niger's youth populace, which accounts for more than half of the total population.

Reforms: In an attempt to address these challenges, Niger implemented a 10-Year Education and Development Program (also known by its French initials PDDE) for the period of 2003-2013. The intent behind the program was to increase enrollment and improve scholastic conditions. Niger has made progress on both fronts in recent years.

For example, the country more than doubled its primary school enrollments between 2000 and 2009. During the same period, Niger added 30,000 new teachers and opened 16,000 new schools. These improvements have been financed by higher education expenditures, which now equal about 4.9% of GDP, a level that exceeds the regional average. Aid from other countries and international organizations also has been used to support these improvements (see *Economics and Resources*).

Rural Students: Another recent improvement to Niger's education system is its capacity to adapt to local needs and traditions. In rural nomadic communities, for example, temporary schools in huts and tents have been established so that they may migrate with the community. Despite these outreach efforts, school enrollment remains far below average for sub-Saharan Africa.

Modern Education System

Education is free and compulsory for Nigeriens age 7-15. Students attend primary school for 6 years before completing two cycles of secondary school. The first cycle includes general courses and spans 4 years, while the second cycle is devoted to 3 years of specialized study. Universities in Niger offer bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees that require between 3 - 8 years to complete.

Preschool and Primary: Enrollment in Niger's preschools is extremely low, 8% in 2018, as almost all preschools are located in cities. By contrast, primary school enrollment stood at 65% in 2017, although having a similar regional disparity, with 97% enrollment in Niamey but only 52% in rural areas. There is also a gender disparity at the primary level, 61% of girls and 70% of boys were enrolled in primary school in 2017.

The language of instruction in most primary schools is French, although some schools now use Hausa or Zarma. Since early exposure to French is rare for some Nigeriens, many students struggle to keep pace. Schools increasingly are trying to meet their needs by incorporating indigenous-language instruction (see *Language and Communication*).

Secondary: Students must pass an examination before they can advance to secondary school. Enrollment at the secondary level is low, with just 23% of male and 17% of female children enrolled in 2017. Part of the reason for the low female rate is that many girls marry by the time they reach secondary school age (see *Family and Kinship*).

Tertiary: Tertiary enrollment is minimal in Niger, with a gross enrollment rate of 4%. Male students outnumber female students at a ratio of 5/2. For both students and faculty, Niger's tertiary institutions lack many critical resources, such as library books, teaching aids, laboratory and facility space, computer equipment, and Internet connectivity. It takes 3 years to earn a bachelor's degree, while earning a master's degree takes 2 years and a PhD an additional 3 years.

Institutions: Tertiary institutions in Niger are concentrated in Niamey. The main public institution of higher learning is Abdou Moumouni University of Niamey (*Université Abdou Moumouni*), formerly known as the University of Niamey. Founded in 1974, Abdou Moumouni University offers courses in law, economics, mathematics, science, and health. Enrollment stood at 23,000 in 2017, with more male than female students.

Another well-known institution of higher learning is the Islamic University of Niger at Say, which offers theological training. In recent years, other public universities have opened, but their enrollments and course offerings remain limited. There are also a few schools that offer vocational training in specific areas, such as teacher certification.

Modern Islamic Education

As an alternative to enrolling in the public school system, many Nigerien children attend one of Niger's approximately 50,000 Qur'anic schools, which educate children in Muslim beliefs and history. Qur'anic school students initially learn to recite the Qur'an and only later interpret its meaning. Qur'anic school curricula are not regulated like those of public schools.

8. TIME AND SPACE

Overview

Embracing both Islamic and indigenous traditions, Nigeriens are conservative in interpersonal relations. They also tend to exhibit a casual attitude toward time and punctuality.

Concept of Time

Nigeriens generally take a more relaxed view of time than most people from Western countries. They view few situations as urgent and tend to emphasize people and relationships over tasks and schedules. The rhythm of life is based more on the sun and the seasons than on calendars and clocks. The Muslim prayer schedule also defines the rhythm of life, as even Nigeriens who do not pray tend to reckon time by reference to prayer times (see *Religion and Spirituality*).

Time and Work

Typical weekday business hours run from 7:30am-12:30pm and 3:00pm-6:00pm, with a 2.5-hour break in the middle for lunch. Some businesses also open on Saturday from 8:00am-12:00pm. Banks are open 8:00am-11:30am and 3:45pm-5:00pm on weekdays and also 8:30am-12:00pm on Saturdays. Upscale restaurants generally set their own distributed hours for each meal, but there are modest eateries open daily from 6:00am-10:00pm.

Although the legal work week in Niger runs for 40 hours in the formal sector, most Nigeriens are employed informally in the agriculture sector (see *Economics and Resources*) and often exceed the legal limit on work hours.

Punctuality

Nigeriens consider patience a virtue in daily living and generally emphasize flexibility and tolerance over punctuality. This attitude is captured succinctly in a common Hausa phrase, ***Sai hankuri*** ("Have patience"). This approach often means that appointments and events do not begin on schedule in Niger.

Concept of Space

Most Nigeriens are warm and friendly, so they tend to welcome touching, eye contact, and physical proximity with their friends and family. Due to the influence of both Islamic beliefs (see *Religion and Spirituality*) and indigenous customs, Nigeriens follow a certain set of norms with respect to physical proximity, especially when there are differences of gender, age, or status (see *Language and Communication*).

Personal Space: Most Nigeriens do not require a large amount of personal space and generally stand close to one another while conversing (see *Language and Communication*). This behavior is partly intended to avoid the need to speak in raised voices, which can be perceived as confrontational.

Eye Contact: Nigeriens regard direct eye contact as a sign of respect when conversing with someone of equal social rank. By contrast, younger Nigeriens are expected to gaze downward and avoid extended eye contact in order to show their reverence for elders (see *Language and Communication*).

Touch: Nigeriens expect a modest degree of touching during interactions and are known to hold hands as a sign of closeness and familiarity. Nigeriens of the same gender may also walk arm-in-arm. More intimate public displays of affection are rare outside of weddings and other celebrations, although they occur more often in rural areas than in cities. In all parts of Niger, men and women rarely have physical contact in public.

Left Hand Taboo

Like people from many cultures throughout the Middle East and Asia, Nigeriens consider the left hand unclean and use it only for personal hygiene. Foreign nationals are advised to avoid using the left hand when eating, gesturing, accepting items, or greeting another person, as Nigeriens may take offense if any of these actions is performed with the left hand.

Photographs

Permits, which are available at police stations, are required for filming and photography. Foreign nationals are advised to always ask permission prior to photographing a Nigerien. Moreover, they also should be aware that even subjects who consent may expect monetary compensation. Foreign nationals should avoid taking photographs of airports, military bases, government facilities, and other public infrastructure.

Negotiations

Nigeriens generally expect to establish mutual trust and a personal relationship with partners prior to beginning any type of negotiations. This preference derives partly from custom and the lack of legal institutions in Niger that can supervise effectively the terms of private agreements.

Once negotiations start, Nigeriens prefer a reserved approach. Foreign nationals should be cautious to not raise their voices, as Nigeriens would perceive such behavior as argumentative. Similarly, foreign nationals should use a reserved tone of voice in offices or other places of business so as to avoid being perceived as impolite (see “Communication Style” in *Language and Communication*).

Nigeriens generally consider it rude to oppose or directly refuse to do something. A neutral or non-committal stance is appropriate. Similarly, they prefer indirect communication, especially when negotiating with individuals of higher social or professional standing.

Lunar Islamic Calendar

Nigerien Muslims use the lunar Islamic calendar for spiritual purposes. Since the Islamic calendar is based on lunar phases, days fall 11 days earlier each year according to the Western calendar. There are 12 months in the Islamic calendar, all of them having 30 days or fewer. Days begin at sunset on what Westerners would consider the previous day. Consequently, each new week begins at sunset on Saturday. Friday, which is the Muslim holy day, begins on what Westerners would deem as Thursday evening.

9. AESTHETICS AND RECREATION

Overview

The traditions of Islam and many different ethnic groups (see *Political and Social Relations*) are evident in the attire, games, performing arts, handicrafts, and celebrations of Niger. While some of those traditions continue unchanged, others have begun to evolve and reflect new and diverse influences.

Attire

Nigeriens value a neat and clean appearance, and many don traditional clothing. Most people prefer modest clothing, so adults do not typically wear shorts. Some urban-dwellers wear modern, Western-style clothing, although usually conservative. Revealing outfits are considered inappropriate and shameful and may elicit an aggressive reaction from some Nigeriens.

Men: Nigerien men usually wear a long, robe-like gown known as a ***boubou*** over pants, often with a small embroidered cap. Although the ***boubou*** is a plain garment, most men have one with elaborate embroidery for formal occasions. Tuareg men wear turbans that cover their whole faces apart from the eyes.

Women: The most popular garment among women in Niger is the ***pagne***, a bright and colorful cloth that wraps around the body. Hausa and Zarma women typically wear the ***pagne*** with a small head covering, a large scarf that envelops the upper body, and a matching, pleated cotton blouse that has a decorative collar. Tuareg and Fulani women, by contrast, tend to wear dark-colored clothing, often with a traditional Islamic headscarf or a scarf draped over their shoulders. A nursing mother who wears an upper body scarf may use it as a sling to carry her infant.

In urban areas, some women wear conservative, Western-style business suits, while others wear full-length wraps. Apart from some teenagers, Nigerien women rarely wear pants or short skirts, which some Nigeriens consider inappropriate for women.

Recreation

As Nigeriens spend most of their time either working or doing strenuous chores, they do not have much time for recreation. When they do have spare time, many Nigeriens choose to visit friends and family where it is customary for men and women to socialize separately (see *Sex and Gender*).

Wrestling: Traditional wrestling, or ***kokowa***, is Niger's most popular sport which the government promotes as a national sport. Most cities in Niger have arenas in which spectators gather to watch the most skilled wrestlers compete.

Attending ***kokowa*** matches is popular in all social groups, as the matches provide a forum for bonding and an opportunity for Nigeriens to feel a sense of unity and national pride. Matches incorporate many cultural traditions, such as wearing charms, offering prayers, playing music, reciting praise poetry, and exchanging greetings (see *Language and Communication*).

Other Sports: Almost all male Nigeriens enjoy playing and watching soccer and also enjoy outdoor sporting activities such as hunting, fishing, and swimming. The Hausa are fond of horse racing, while the Tuareg enjoy camel racing. The Fulani are partial to ***soro***, a sport intended to demonstrate the ability of participants to endure pain. In a game of ***soro***, two men beat each other with a stick on the chest while trying to maintain their composure and act as if they do not feel any discomfort.

Games: Both adults and children enjoy traditional board games like ***mancala***, an ancient game that is found in various forms throughout Africa. Its popularity is due partly to the fact that a game of ***mancala*** can be set up and played with items easily available in nature. Each board has 2 or more rows of pits carved into wood or ivory, drawn on paper, or dug into the ground. The game pieces are seeds or some other small articles, and the object is to capture as many of the seeds of one's opponent as possible. Nigeriens also play colonial-era card games known as ***agram*** and ***sink-sink***.

Music and Dance

Modern Nigerien music is a synthesis of modern styles and the traditions of various ethnic groups. Nigeriens of all ages enjoy ***Afro-pop***, which is among the most prominent genres of modern music. One of the most popular ***Afro-pop*** bands in Niger is Mamar Kassey, which plays a unique fusion of modern rhythms and indigenous sounds using both traditional instruments like the ***tambour*** (drum) and modern instruments like the electric bass.

Reggae and Western musical styles such as blues and rap are also popular. Young Nigeriens especially enjoy hip-hop which blends traditional melodies with outspoken lyrics. Other popular genres include energetic music which incorporates electronic sounds and ***dandali*** which is derived from Indian musicals. These genres are typically played at open-air ***maquis*** bars.

Theater

Nigeriens perform plays in schools and village centers and also broadcast them on TV and radio. The most famous Nigerien playwright was a Hausa named Yazi Dogo, who helped to establish Hausa theater's reputation for portraying traditional society in a comedic light while conveying poignant themes.

Literature and Folklore

Nigeriens have a tradition of folklore that includes proverbs, poems, songs, legends, and plays. Oral storytelling is important because relatively few Nigeriens are literate (see *Learning and Knowledge*). In recent years, artists and scholars at Niamey's Abdou Moumouni University have transcribed and published some of Niger's oral works.

Although written literature existed in Niger before the colonial era (see *Language and Communication*), it grew in importance after the arrival of the French (see *History and Myth*). Modern Nigerien literature is written primarily in French and generally follows Western styles. The most famous Nigerien author was Boubou Hama, who wrote over 50 French-language books, including works of history, philosophy, and fiction.

Arts and Crafts

Nigeriens create arts and crafts not just to express themselves but also as a source of income. For example, Fulani women carve and decorate calabashes (gourds) for sale at market, while Hausa women create Islamic-themed jewelry, clothing, and utensils for the same purpose. Zarma women are known as skilled potters and make elaborately decorated water jars, while Tuareg men are known as skilled smiths and jewelry makers. Hausa women sew elaborate, multi-colored blankets for display at their children's ***baptème*** (name day—see *Family and Kinship*).

Holidays

Secular Holidays (Fixed Dates)

- January 1: New Year's Day
- April 24: Concord Day
- May 1: Labor Day
- August 3: Independence Day
- December 18: Republic Day
- December 25: Christmas Day

Religious Months and Holidays (Variable Dates)

- March – April: Easter Monday
- ***Maulid***: Birthday of the Prophet Muhammad
- ***Ramadan***: Holy Month of Fasting
- ***Laylat al-Qadr***: Night of Destiny
- ***Eid al-Fitr***: End of ***Ramadan***
- ***Tabaski***: The Feast of the Sacrifice

Holidays

Government offices are closed during state-declared holidays. For most Nigeriens, the most important holidays are the Islamic celebrations of ***Maulid***, ***Eid al-Fitr,*** and ***Eid al-Adha***, the latter known locally as ***Tabaski***. Some holidays are specific to certain ethnic groups. For example, members of the Tuareg and Wodaabe ethnic groups observe the ***Cure Salée***, which celebrates the migration of cattle to nourishing salt deposits and marks the traditional time of courtship and marriage.

10. SUSTENANCE AND HEALTH

Sustenance Overview

The Nigerien diet and its associated dining customs have been shaped by the country's crops, livestock, and Islamic beliefs which most Nigerien people consider sacred (see *Religion and Spirituality*).

Dining Customs

Nigerien dining customs vary between rural and urban areas. In rural areas, men and women eat separately while sitting on woven floor mats. By contrast, men and women in urban areas eat together at a single table. All Nigeriens eat from communal bowls using either a spoon or their right hand (see *Time and Space*). Although men sometimes eat outside the home, Nigeriens consider it inappropriate for women to eat in public.

Diet

The central components of the Nigerien diet are millet, a cereal grain that grows well in Niger's arid climate, and other staples such as beans, corn, and sorghum. Rice is also popular although only cultivated near the Niger River because it requires irrigation. Consequently, many Nigeriens view rice as a status symbol and eat it only on special occasions. Some Nigeriens also base their diet on foods such as cassava, couscous, and ***maca*** (macaroni). Due to its high market price, ***maca*** like rice, is associated with high status.

Meat and Dairy: Apart from providing sustenance, animals are used for Muslim sacrificial purposes and for consumption at various holiday celebrations. The most common meat is goat, although camel, chicken, and mutton also are available. As in most Islamic societies, Nigeriens avoid pork. Popular regional dishes include goat cheese in the North and ***kilshi***—a spiced jerky made of sheep or beef—in the South.

Typical Meals: Although wealthier urban Nigeriens sometimes start their days with coffee and bread, most rural Nigeriens breakfast on leftovers from the previous day. Lunch usually consists of ***fura***, a thick beverage made from millet (fine grain), water, spices, and sometimes milk or sugar. Tuaregs make a similar drink known as ***eghajira***, which is made from millet, water, dates, and goat cheese. For dinner, Nigeriens usually eat ***tuwo***, a thick millet paste, along with a vegetable sauce made from ingredients such as eggplant, onion, okra, peanuts, pumpkin, squash, tomatoes, and sometimes meat.

Snacks: Nigeriens eat a variety of snacks, including peanuts, sugarcane, mangos, lettuce, spiced cabbage, and even fried crickets at certain times of year. Female vendors also prepare ***kosai***, or deep-fried bean cakes. Nigeriens also chew kola nuts for their stimulating and hunger-reducing properties. Men in particular traditionally chew kola nuts, which due to the nut's high caffeine content, is a popular West African social pastime.

Beverages

The most common beverages are water, milk, and juice. Soft drinks are also widely available. While Islam prohibits alcohol consumption, alcoholic beverages are available in Niger. The region's traditional alcoholic beverages include palm wine and millet beer, although modern beverages—including the beer Bière Niger—also are consumed.

Health Overview

Niger's health profile is poor overall and characterized by low life expectancy; high rates of infectious disease; high rates of infant, child, and maternal mortality; and shortages of supplies, equipment, medicine, and personnel. Moreover, there are major healthcare disparities between urban and rural areas.

Despite these problems, the situation has improved modestly in recent years due to the efforts of Niger's government, which has initiated vaccination and health education campaigns in rural

regions. Since 2005, the government has also offered free healthcare to all pregnant women and children under age 5.

Traditional Medicine

"Traditional medicine" refers to knowledge, skills, and practices that are used to pursue holistic health and are derived from the beliefs, experiences, and theories of an indigenous population. There are several types of traditional practitioners in Niger.

Herbalists, for example, treat illness with leaves, roots, bark, and sometimes ritual chants, while skeletal specialists mend broken bones. Similarly, spiritualists try to communicate with spirits to assist in healing (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Islamic scholars also offer counsel and treatment to Nigeriens through prayer and Qur'anic verses. In recent years, Chinese medicine has become popular, especially in Niamey, where one can find traditional, Chinese-style clinics and pharmacies.

For several reasons, Nigeriens often prefer traditional medicine to Western-style medicine. For example, traditional medicine is usually much less expensive than Western-style medicine, and traditional healers are more accessible to residents of remote rural areas. In addition, traditional healers incorporate common cultural and religious values into their practice.

Modern Healthcare

The healthcare system in all of Niger's 36 districts is organized at 3 levels, although 6 districts, mainly in the Tahoua region, do not have any medical facilities. The first level of care consists of health posts, which provide basic treatment and preventive care to a single village. Health posts tend to function poorly because they are run by scarcely trained health workers and are subject to little supervision. The second level of care consists of 504 health centers or CSIs (*Centres de santé intégré*), which provide care to several villages. CSIs are run by nurses and overseen by local committees.

Cases that CSIs cannot handle are referred to one of 40 district hospitals, which provide advanced treatment. Similarly, cases

that district hospitals cannot resolve are referred again to one of either 15 regional hospitals or 3 national hospitals. Niger also has maternity clinics and mobile immunization units.

Problems: The Nigerien healthcare system faces a shortage of supplies, equipment, medicine, and personnel. Niger has only 2 doctors per 100,000 people, which is 1/10 the ratio for sub-Saharan Africa and well below the World Health Organization's recommendation of 20 doctors per 100,000 people. Medical equipment is scarce and unevenly distributed, and the lack of medications leads to trade in unregulated substances.

Health Challenges

Nigeriens have a life expectancy at birth of just 59 years, slightly lower than the life expectancy for sub-Saharan Africa as a whole, but almost 21 years less than the US life expectancy. Niger also has some of the world's highest rates of maternal, infant, and child mortality. In recent years, the country has suffered about 5.1 maternal, 68 infant, and 84 child deaths for every 1,000 live births, levels which far exceed US rates. Niger's health statistics reflect widespread malnutrition, affecting 42% of Nigerien children, and high incidence of infectious diseases including malaria, measles, pneumonia, polio, and tuberculosis.

Malaria: Malaria, which mostly affects southern Niger, is the leading cause of death among Nigerien women and children Malaria accounts for 28% of all illnesses and 50% of all recorded deaths. Children under five years of age account for about 62 % of the burden of malaria. Since only 15% of Nigeriens who contract malaria seek medical help, most cases are untreated.

Other Diseases: Waterborne and foodborne illnesses such as cholera, hepatitis A, and typhoid fever are concerns. Conditions like diarrhea and pneumonia also are common and sometimes fatal when untreated. In 2018, there were a reported 87 cases of tuberculosis per 100,000 people, and screenings were rare. HIV, which affects 0.3% of Nigeriens, is also a concern, although Niger's rate is well below neighboring Nigeria's 1.5% rate and sub-Saharan Africa's rate of 3.9%.

11. ECONOMICS AND RESOURCES

Overview

By any conventional measure, Niger is one of the poorest and least economically developed countries in the world. Much of its income is derived from foreign aid and uranium exports, and its main economic activities include farming, herding, and minor retail trade. Only a few Nigeriens have regular, wage-earning jobs, most of which are in the civil service.

Due to its lack of diversification, the Nigerien economy is tied closely to rainfall (for agriculture) and global commodity prices (for both agricultural and mineral exports). In some years, Niger produces enough food to feed its population, while in other years the country relies upon imports and foreign aid, the latter of which constitutes about half of the government budget.

Agriculture

Accounting for 39% of GDP and 76% of employment, agricultural activities such as farming, herding, fishing, and forestry constitute the bulk of Niger's economy. Farming occurs mainly in the well-watered South, where most of the country's arable land (about 13% of the total area) is located. The most widely cultivated subsistence crops are millet and sorghum grains, cassava (starchy root used to make bread), and rice, while the most popular cash crops are peanuts, cotton, and beans.

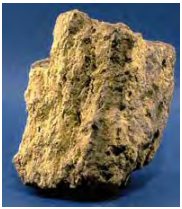
Herding occurs mainly in the more arid regions of the northern Sahel (see *Political and Social Relations*). Although Nigeriens raise a variety of livestock, such as camels, goats, sheep, and donkeys, the bulk of the country's livestock exports are cattle. Niger has had trouble expanding its cattle export industry due to its lack of infrastructure for transportation and preservation.

As Niger is landlocked, its fishing industry is small and limited to areas near Lake Chad and along the Niger River. Most fish production is intended to meet local demand, although limited exports to neighboring countries occur.

Industry

Industrial activities such as mining and manufacturing comprise the smallest part of the Nigerien economy, accounting for about 16% of GDP and 8% of employment. Still, industry is important to Niger's economy because mineral exports are one of Niger's few sources of external income. Besides uranium, which is its primary mineral, Niger also has deposits of coal, iron, gypsum (soft sulfate), limestone, and phosphates. Manufacturing centers on cement, textiles, leather, and food processing.

Uranium: Niger was the world's 4th largest producer of uranium in 2018, accounting for 7.5% of global output (Photo: Uranium ore). Although there are at least 9 sites with substantial reserves, only those at Arlit and Akouta, which are about 130 mi north of Agadez, have been exploited. French firms historically have controlled much of the revenue from Niger's uranium, although there have been local demands in recent years to divide that revenue more evenly with the Nigerien government.



Gold and Oil: In recent years, rising commodity prices and the revision of Niger's mining code have attracted foreign investors to Niger's gold and oil reserves, which in the past could not be exploited profitably. The first commercial goldmine was opened in 2004 at Samira Hill near the Burkina Faso border. Similarly, several oilfields, particularly one sponsored by China's National Petroleum Cooperation, became operational in eastern Niger in 2011.

Services

Although services account for 38% of GDP, they provide only 16% of employment. Most services sector activities involve civil service or retail trade. Some Tuareg men still ply the traditional caravan trade routes in the desert, although those routes have declined in importance due to modernization.

Tourism: Niger has several notable tourist attractions, such as Park W, a wildlife preserve in the Southwest, and Agadez, the "desert capital" of the Tuareg. However, the growth of Niger's tourism industry has been hampered by terrorist activity and recurrent Tuareg rebellion (see *Political and Social Relations*).

Currency

The currency of Niger is the West African CFA Franc, which is subdivided into 100 ***centimes***. It is circulated in 4 banknotes (CFA 1,000, 2,000, 5,000, 10,000) and 8 coins (CFA 1, 5, 10, 25, 50, 100, 200, 250, 500), and $1 is worth about CFA $601.50.

The West African CFA Franc is regulated by the Central Bank of West African States in Dakar, Senegal and is used by 8 countries: Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Niger, Senegal, and Togo. In addition, the Central African CFA Franc, a distinct but effectively equivalent currency, is used by 6 central African states. The value of both versions of the CFA Franc is guaranteed by the French government.

Foreign Trade

Niger's imports, which totaled $2.2 billion in 2018, consisted primarily of machinery, petroleum, and food purchased from France, China, the US, Nigeria, and Thailand. Exports, which totaled $1.293 billion in 2018, consisted of uranium, livestock, and agricultural products sold to France, Thailand, Malaysia, Nigeria, and Mali.

Foreign Aid

Niger received $1.196 billion, or the equivalent of 13% of the country's gross national income, in foreign aid in 2017-2018. In 2018, around 45% of total aid was contributed by multilateral bodies, including the European Union, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and other international agencies. The rest came from single-party donors, of whom the largest were the US, France, Italy, Germany, and Luxembourg. In February 2017, the IMF approved a new 3-year $134 million ECF. In June 2017, The World Bank's International Development Association (IDA) granted Niger $1 billion over three years for IDA18, a program to boost the country's development and alleviate poverty. A $437 million Millennium Challenge Account compact for Niger will focus on irrigation infrastructure and agriculture.

12. TECHNOLOGY AND MATERIAL

Overview

Niger has relatively little technological infrastructure due to its landlocked location and relatively underdeveloped economy. In contrast to just a few years ago, however, it has a diverse and outspoken press and millions of new cell phone users.

Transportation

For local trips, most Nigeriens walk or ride a donkey, camel, moped, or motorcycle. For longer trips, the most popular form of transport is the "bush taxi," or ***taxi-brousse***. Bush taxis carry 8-10 passengers and generally depart when they are full rather than at a predetermined time. Although Nigerien bush taxis are cheap and plentiful, they also tend to be slow and crowded. For faster and more reliable transport between cities, Nigeriens generally rely upon pricier coach buses, which also are common. Only a few Nigeriens own personal automobiles, making car travel rare.

Roadways: In 2017, Niger had slightly less than 12,489 mi of roadways, of which about 3,000 mi—mainly highways and city roads—were paved. Niger's main highways link Niamey with Agadez and Tahoua in the North; Zinder, Diffa, and Nguigmi in the East; and the Nigerian towns of Sokoto and Kano in the South. In addition, Zinder and Agadez are linked by a highway that forms part of of the Trans-Sahara Highway, a route that links Lagos, Nigeria with Algiers, Algeria. The only two bridges in Niger that span the Niger River are located in Niamey.

Railways: In April of 2015, construction began on a 357-mile section of railway to join Niamey to the eastern town of Parakou, which already had an existing link to Cotonou. The link, which was inaugurated in 2016, forms part of a planned 1740-mile network joining the Ivory Coast, Benin, Burkina Faso, Togo, and Niger.

Ports and Waterways: As a landlocked country with no large, permanent bodies of water, Niger has no ports. Instead, most of Niger's sea-bound cargo travels through Lagos, Nigeria, or Cotonou, Benin. Niger has tried to reduce its dependence on these ports by expanding its connections to the ports of Lomé in Togo and Tema in Ghana.

Airways: Niger has 30 airports and airstrips, of which 10 have paved runways. The country's primary air transit hub is Diori Hamani International Airport (pictured), which is located in Niamey and is named after the first President (see *History and Myth*). Niamey is served both by regional carriers, such as Senegal Airlines, Air Burkina, and Air Algerie, and global carriers, such as Air France, Delta, and Turkish Airlines. Direct flights are available from Niamey to regional capitals, including Ouagadougou and N'Djamena, and international capitals, including Paris and Istanbul.

Energy

Even without adjusting for population size, Niger has one of the world's lowest energy consumption rates. Roughly 20% of the population has access to electricity, and most Nigeriens meet their energy needs with wood fuel. About half of the country's small electricity requirement is imported from Nigeria, while the rest is generated from local coal, imported petroleum, or solar energy—the latter is rare and limited to rural areas.

Hydropower: Although it has yet to be exploited, Niger has the potential to generate hydroelectric power at several sites along the Niger and Mékrou rivers. The most promising site is located about 125 mi north of Niamey at Kandadji, where a 125-MW plant is under construction.

Media

Freedom of the press deteriorated in Niger under the regime of President Mamadou Tandja (see *History and Myth*). In addition to banning coverage of the Tuareg rebellion of 2007-2009, the Tandja regime imprisoned reporters, both foreign and Nigerien, and shut down radio stations and newspapers that spoke out against the government.

The situation has improved since the end of the Tandja regime. According to Reporters without Borders, a non-profit group that monitors press freedom, the media in Niger are diverse and outspoken, and journalists are rarely punished for criticizing the government. In addition, the 2010 constitution guarantees freedom of expression, although it retains certain provisions that could be used to limit media freedom in the future.

Print Media: The government runs two news publications, both written in French: *Le Sahel*, a daily newspaper, and *Sahel dimanche*, a weekly news magazine. Private news publications include *La Roue de l'histoire* ("The Wheel of History"), a weekly newspaper that covers politics, economics, and social issues; *Le Canard dechaine* ("The Unchained Duck"), an irreverent, satirical weekly newspaper; and *Le Republicain*, a weekly news magazine noted for its anti-corruption stance.

Radio and TV: Radio and TV are critical sources of information in Niger because less than 1/3 of the population is literate (see *Learning and Knowledge*). The Nigerien government operates Voix du Sahel, the main national radio station, and Tele Sahel, a TV station that broadcasts mostly educational programming in several different languages. There are private competitors in both media. Private TV stations include news channels Dounia TV and Ténéré TV, while private radio stations include Radio Saraounia, Anfani FM, and Ténéré FM.

Telecommunications

As in much of Africa, cell phones are more popular than landlines in Niger. An estimated 8.8 million Nigeriens, or about 46% of the population, used cell phones in 2017, which is almost 8 times higher than the number of landline subscribers. Cellular service is available in most of Niger and is provided by 4 telecoms: Airtel Niger, Moov Niger, Orange, and SahelCom.

In 2018, an estimated 5% of the Nigerien population used the Internet, which is easily accessible in Niamey but more difficult to access in other parts of Niger, including major cities like Agadez and Zinder. Connection speeds tend to be slow.

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