Expeditionary Culture Field Guide

GABON

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 (US Army soldier inspects Gabonese paratrooper's gear).

Part 2: Presents "Culture Specific" Gabon, focusing on unique cultural features of Gabonese society and is designed to complement other pre-deployment training. It applies culture-general concepts to help increase your knowledge of your assigned deployment location (Photo: Gabonese sailors).

For further information, visit the Air Force Culture and Language Center (AFCLC) website at http://culture.af.mil/ 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

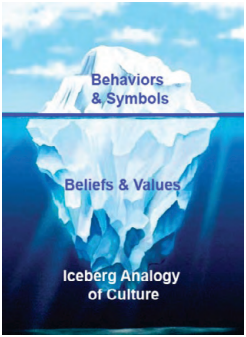
One of our basic human behaviors is the tendency to classify others as similar or different according to our cultural standard. As depicted in the chart below, we can apply the 12 cultural domains to help us compare similarities and differences across cultures. We evaluate others' behavior to determine 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 53-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 2005 statistics, only half of the

continent's children were enrolled in primary school, leaving over 40 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

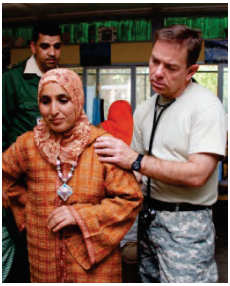
growing number of African basketball players on US college campuses and in the National Basketball Association (NBA).

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 11% of the global population, Africa is a victim of many of the world's debilitating health disorders. According to the World Health Organization, 60% of the global HIV/AIDS cases and 90% 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 58% 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 Gabonese society.

PART 2 – CULTURE SPECIFIC

1. HISTORY AND MYTH

History Overview

Gabon's early history was defined first by the arrival of Bantu-speaking migrants and later by the appearance of European traders and explorers. Since attaining independence in 1960, the country's history has been defined by the role of oil, timber, and mineral exports in sustaining long-term autocratic rule.

Early Gabon

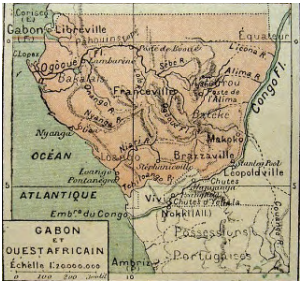
As there is no written record of events in Gabon prior to the arrival of Europeans in the 15th century, all accounts of Gabon's early history are based on archaeological artifacts, oral tradition, and other forms of indirect evidence. Consequently, fairly little is known about the history of Gabon prior to the last few centuries.

Artifacts found near the present-day city of Lopé suggest that humans have inhabited what is now Gabon since at least 7000 BC, although humans probably appeared in the region many thousands of years before. Other artifacts suggest that some inhabitants of Gabon had begun smelting iron by 4000 BC.

Pygmies: Of the ethnic groups that now live in Gabon, the Pygmies (see *Political and Social Relations*) were the earliest inhabitants of the region, having arrived no later than 1100 AD. The Pygmies were nomadic, forest-dwelling hunter-gatherers who were forced out of their original home in central Africa by the advance of Bantu-speaking migrants (see *Language and Communication*). Unfortunately for the Pygmies, the Bantu-speakers followed them southwestward and began arriving in the Gabonese area around 1300 AD.

Bantu-Speakers: Arriving mostly from the North over a period of several centuries, the Bantu-speakers gradually filtered into Gabon's forests and dispersed into small, isolated villages, where they sustained themselves through hunting, fishing, and some subsistence farming. Apart from Bantu-speaking Loango, a kingdom that was based in present-day Republic of Congo but extended northward into what is now Gabon, the region had no centralized political structures before the colonial era.

Arrival of Europeans



Lopez Gonzalez, a Portuguese sailor who explored the Komo River estuary in 1474, was the first European to arrive in Gabon. He reportedly gave Gabon its name when he noted that the estuary looked like a ***gabão***, or sailor's cloak. Dutch, English, French, and Spanish sailors were the next to arrive, and by the mid-17th century, the Dutch had seized control of the region from the Portuguese. The Dutch were interested in obtaining gold, ivory, and slaves for their sugar plantations in South America.

Slave Trade: Between the 16th and 19th centuries, millions of Africans were captured—mostly by African profiteers—and sold to European traders, who brought the captives to North and South America and sold them as slaves. In Gabon specifically, the Mpongwe and Orungu ethnic groups (see *Political and Social Relations*) became the slave trade racketeers, who used the slave enterprise to achieve an elevated social status that they maintain to this day.

Starting in the 18th century, most European powers abolished slavery, the slave trade, or both practices and began enforcing those bans far beyond their shores. Accordingly, the French Navy commenced anti-slavery patrols along Africa's Atlantic Coast in the late 1820s. Despite the French's emerging efforts to curtail Gabon's slave trade, slaves continued were increasingly exported to Cuba, Brazil, and Sao Tome.

French Treaties: In 1839 Louis Edouard Bouët-Willaumez, a French Navy lieutenant, obtained land on the Gabon Estuary from King Rapontchombo of the Mpongwe in exchange for French protection and a small cache of manufactured goods, including tobacco, hats, and guns. The French signed similar agreements with other local rulers over the next few years.

Explorers: In the mid-1800s European explorers such as Paul Belloni du Chaillu, a French-American who undertook two separate expeditions in 1855 and 1863, began an initial survey of the Gabonese interior. His reports described seeing gorillas, meeting Pygmies, and dining with members of the Fang ethnic group (see *Political and Social Relations*)—events that du Chaillu likely was the first white man to experience.

Inspired by du Chaillu's writings among other influences, French-Italian sailor Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza (pictured) explored the area on behalf of France in 1875. His first journey lasted 3 years and took him more than 300 mi into the Gabonese interior. His next expedition was more notable, however, as Henry Morton Stanley, an American explorer working for the Belgian government, was competing with Brazza to secure trading agreements with the people of the interior. Through little more than persuasion, Brazza extended French control from the Gabonese coast to the Congo River and established the legal basis for France's colonial claims in the region. He also founded Brazzaville, the capital of the Republic of the Congo.

French Congo

In 1884 and 1885 the European powers met at the Berlin West Africa Conference to define which powers had rights in which parts of Africa. French claims in present-day Republic of the Congo and Gabon were recognized at the summit, and both territories became part of French Congo. However, the French had little interest in developing French Congo, so they granted large concessions to ivory and rubber companies. Although these companies profited little from their exploits, their harsh labor practices kindled hatred among the local population.

French Equatorial Africa

In 1910 the territories of French Congo were joined with other French colonial possessions to form French Equatorial Africa, a colonial federation consisting of Chad, Gabon, Middle Congo (Republic of the Congo), and Ubangi-Chari (Central African Republic). From the formation of French Equatorial Africa until the end of World War II, the French imposed a two-tier social system in Gabon. Members of the top tier, which was composed mostly of wealthy Mpongwe traders and people of mixed European and African descent, were trained for high-level government jobs. Those of the much larger lower tier (known as the ***indigénat***) were subject to burdensome tax and labor regulations and had inferior legal and political status.

During World War II the Governor-General of French Equatorial Africa convinced the people of his federation to side with the Free French in opposing collaboration with Nazi Germany instead of the Vichy French government, which collaborated with Nazi Germany after the fall of France in 1940. In 1946 the postwar French government, which the Free French controlled, rewarded the federation's loyalty by increasing the political rights of subjects and ending the ***indigénat*** system.

Preparations for Independence

The 1946 reforms were followed quickly by other measures. In 1956 the French Parliament passed a law that provided for the creation of a National Assembly in Gabon and other French colonies. In 1958 a referendum to make Gabon an autonomous republic within the French community was held and approved. One year later Gabon adopted a constitution and established a provisional government in preparation for independence.

These changes inspired local political activity and rise of native politicians. The most prominent pre-independence politicians were Léon M'ba and Jean-Hilaire Aubame of the Fang ethnic group and Paul Gondjout of the Mpongwe ethnic group. M'ba and Aubame eventually formed an alliance and built a strong coalition of Mpongwe businessmen and Fang coastal elites.

Independence

On August 17, 1960, Gabon attained its independence from France as a parliamentary republic under the leadership of Prime Minister Léon M'ba, who became the first President of the Republic of Gabon on February 12, 1961. The new country continued a close association with France after independence. Gabon allowed France to continue using Gabon as a regional power base in exchange for technical assistance from French civil servants and security guarantees from the French military.

M'ba soon began the process of entrenching his own political power by undercutting his rivals and introducing strict controls on political speech. In 1964 he tried to dissolve the National Assembly and create a single-party state, prompting a group of Gabonese Army officers to stage a bloodless and successful coup d'état on February 18, 1964. However, the French military intervened and restored M'ba to power the very next day.

The Bongo Era

M'ba became ill and died in 1967. Power passed to Vice President Albert-Bernard Bongo (pictured) who changed his name to El-Hadj Omar Bongo Ondimba after his adoption of Islam in 1973. Within a year of taking office, Bongo dissolved all political parties, founded the Gabonese Democratic Party (known by its French initials PDG), and declared Gabon a single-party state. Apart from consolidating his political power, Bongo's motivation was to unite the people of Gabon around the government's efforts to develop the country and to suppress the ethnic divisions that had sometimes complicated Gabonese politics in the past.

In 1975 Bongo was elected to the office he had assumed after M'ba's death and reelected in 1979 and 1986. During this time, Gabon earned large amounts of money by exporting oil, timber, and minerals. This income allowed Bongo to buy stability by dispensing political patronage. It also allowed the government to announce pricey development projects like the Trans-Gabon Railway (see *Technology and Material*), although many such projects were never completed.

Political Unrest

Despite the relative political stability enabled by its export income, Gabon still experienced political unrest, usually due to Bongo's authoritarian policies. For example, the Movement for National Renewal (known by its French initials MORENA), was formed in 1981 to protest government corruption, single-party politics, and economic inequality.

Political unrest intensified in the mid-1980s when a decline in oil prices made it harder for the government to pay interest on its debts, forcing it to adopt austere measures as part of an "internal adjustment" policy. The effect of these measures fell disproportionately on poor and middle-class Gabonese. At the same time, global media outlets chronicled the opulent lifestyle of the Gabonese elite, stoking unrest among the increasingly impoverished masses.

After riots broke out in Libreville and Port-Gentil in early 1990, Bongo convened a national "Conference on Democracy" in order to negotiate with opposition leaders. This conference led to the ratification in 1991 of a new constitution that restored multiparty politics and guaranteed civil liberties. Still, Bongo and the PDG remained in control. Allegedly with the help of rigged polls, Bongo was reelected again in 1993, 1998, and 2005 despite continued dissent and economic dislocation.

Modern Gabon

In 2009 Bongo died of cardiac arrest at a clinic in Spain. With elections scheduled for August of that year, Ali Bongo Ondimba (pictured), son of the late Bongo and the former Minister of National Defense and Foreign Affairs, was declared the winner with 42% of the vote. Although some opponents dismissed the result as a sham, it was validated by Gabon's Constitutional Court after a 3-week review. Many Gabonese greeted the younger Bongo's election with dismay. After 41 years under the rule of the elder Bongo, many had hoped for a change of direction. Nevertheless, other Gabonese accepted the younger Bongo as a competent "technocrat" who could be relied upon to reform the country.

Myth Overview

Due partly to the fact that it had no written form of indigenous languages until the 19th century, Gabon has a rich tradition of spoken myth and folklore. Although stories vary by ethnic group, they have similar characters and themes. For example, many Gabonese myths incorporate animal characters and convey moral lessons, while others are used to explain how the world originated (see below).

Fang Creation Myth

The Fang (see *Political and Social Relations*) used myth to explain the origin of the world. According to Fang tradition, there is a creator known as ***Nzame*** who embodies 3 different figures: Nzame, the transcendent God of the heavens; Mebere, the male aspect of creation; and Nkwa, the female aspect of creation. Of this triad, Nzame made the universe, including the Earth. When Nzame showed his creation to Mebere and Nkwa, they felt that the Earth needed its own ruler, so they appointed an elephant, a leopard, and a monkey to serve as a ruling council (Photo: A Fang mask used by the ***ngil***, a pre-20th century Fang society that worked to identify practitioners of witchcraft—see *Religion and Spirituality*).

Nzame liked the idea of a ruler but disliked the council, so the 3 figures created Fam, an immortal being after their own image, to rule over the Earth. Fam soon became arrogant and power-thirsty, so Nzame punished him by sending a storm that wiped out everything except Fam, who survived because he was immortal. Fam fled and hid after the storm, and Nzame replaced him with Sekume, a mortal who became the first ancestor of the Fang people. With the permission of Nzame, Sekume created a wife for himself from a tree, and the couple proceeded to have a large number of children.

Just as some US citizens do not believe that George Washington actually chopped down a cherry tree and then refused to lie, not all Fang believe that the events of the myth actually happened.

2. POLITICAL AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

Official Name
Gabonese Republic
République Gabonaise

Political Borders
Equatorial Guinea: 217 mi
Cameroon: 185 mi
Republic of the Congo: 1,182 mi
Coastline: 550 mi

Capital
Libreville

Demographics
Gabon's population of 1.7 million is growing at a rate of slightly more than 2% per year. With a population density of 20 persons per sq mi, Gabon is one of the world's most sparsely populated countries. About 87.2% of the population lives in cities of which 42% reside in Libreville. The remainder of the population is dispersed across a large number of rural villages. With about 75% of its population under age 30, Gabon is a young country.

Flag
Gabon's flag consists of 3 equal-width horizontal bands of green, yellow, and blue. Green symbolizes Gabon's rainforests and natural resources; yellow represents the equator and the sun; while blue signifies the sea.

Geography
Gabon is located on the equator along Africa's Atlantic Coast, having a total area of 103,347 sq mi, which is slightly smaller than Colorado. It is bordered to the northwest by Equatorial Guinea, to the north by Cameroon, and to the east and south by the Republic of the Congo. The island country of São Tomé and Príncipe is located approximately 160 mi off the coast of Gabon in the Gulf of Guinea.

About 4/5 of Gabon is covered by tropical rainforest, which in some remote and mountainous parts of the country may be as old as 100 million years. Grassy savanna dotted with shrubs and trees blankets the non-forested parts of Gabon, which lie mostly in the Southeast (Photo: A sign marking a road crossing of the Komo River, which begins in southwestern Equatorial Guinea and empties into the Gabon Estuary near Libreville).

Gabon has 3 topographical zones. First, there is a low-lying coastal plain that ranges from 20-120 mi in width. This plain is rocky and jagged in the North but sandy and smooth in the South. Second, there are inland plateaus in the North and East that range from 1,000-2,600 ft in elevation. Finally, there are two mountain ranges—the Crystal Mountains in the North and the Chaillu Mountains in the South—that rise in excess of 3,000 ft. The latter range includes Mount Iboundji, which is the highest point in Gabon at 5,167 ft.

The Ogooué River flows between Gabon's mountain ranges, dissecting the country as it winds along its 745-mi route from its source in western Republic of the Congo to the Atlantic coast near Port-Gentil. For its final 100 mi, the Ogooué flows through a delta covered with lakes, marshes, and aquatic plants.

Climate

Gabon's climate varies by region—the coast is less humid than the inlands, while the South is less rainy than the North. Generally, Gabon is hot and humid, with an average year-round temperature and humidity of 77-79°F and 80-85% respectively. In addition, the country has an average annual rainfall of about 100 inches. There are 2 major seasons: a rainy season from February until May, and a dry season that begins in late May and lasts until September. There is a shorter, more intense rainy season in October and November, and a second dry season in December and January. Temperatures drop as low as 65°F during the dry seasons and rise as high as 93°F during the rainy seasons.

Natural Hazards

While the completion of the Trans-Gabon Railway (see *Technology and Material*) in 1986 made it easier to access Gabon's interior, it did so at the expense of old-growth forests. Timber firms are logging increasingly, while poachers view rare animal species as a new source of wild meat called bushmeat (see *Sustenance and Health*). This exploitation of the forest is linked to issues such as deforestation and reduced biodiversity.

Government

Gabon is a multiparty presidential republic that consists of 9 provinces, which collectively subdivide into 36 ***préfectures*** and 8 ***sous-préfectures***. The country gained independence from France on August 17, 1960, adopting a constitution the following year. That constitution was revised in 1975, rewritten in 1991, and revised again in 1997 and 2003.

Executive Branch

The President—currently Ali Bongo Ondimba (pictured)—is elected by direct popular vote to serve a 7-year term. There is no longer a legal limit on the number of terms that the President may serve. The President is chief-of-state and is responsible for selecting a Prime Minister, who serves as head-of-government and therefore is responsible for selecting a Council of Ministers (Cabinet) with the advice of the President and subject to the approval of the National Assembly (see below). The President is empowered to remove Ministers, including the Prime Minister, and also has the power to delay legislation or dissolve the National Assembly.

Legislative Branch

Gabon's legislature consists of a 120-seat National Assembly and, since 1997, a 102-seat Senate. Members of the National Assembly are elected to serve 5-year terms, while members of the Senate are elected to serve 6-year terms. The legislature is empowered to dissolve the Council of Ministers through a vote of no confidence, while the President of the Senate assumes power if the President dies or becomes incapacitated.

Judicial Branch

Gabon's legal system is based mostly on French civil law. Undergoing an extensive overhaul with the 1991 constitution, the court system now consists of 3 types: lower courts, appeals courts, and supreme courts. Customary courts, which are based on indigenous customs and overseen by local chiefs, no longer play a role in the formal legal system, although they still enjoy broad informal usage.

Political Climate

As has been the case since the late 1960s, the Bongo family and the Gabonese Democratic Party (PDG) control almost all aspects of Gabonese politics. Historically, this domination has depended upon oil and timber export revenues (see *Economics and Resources*), which have allowed the PDG to dispense political patronage and provide a middle-class standard of living for some Gabonese (Pictured: The Presidential Standard of Gabon from 1960 until 1990—see *History and Myth*).

In recent years, those revenues have shown signs of impending decline, while the Gabonese people have grown less satisfied with the seemingly open-ended tenure of the Bongo family. The primary complaint against Bongo and the PDG elite is that they use public resources for private financial gain. This complaint seems plausible: the elder Bongo was worth at least $2 billion when he died in 2009.

In light of these issues, President Bongo seems vulnerable to political challengers, especially since he was elected with only 42% of the vote. The opposition remains fragmented into 3 parties that lack effective leadership and seem unable to present a unified front. Moreover, Bongo retains a substantial degree of support. While many Gabonese see him as a despot, others point to his support of good governance, infrastructure improvement, and youth and female political representation as evidence that he is a technocratic reformer. Consequently, the position of Bongo and the PDG seems safe for the time being.

Defense

The Gabonese Armed Forces (FAG—*Forces Armées Gabonaises*) consists of 4 services—Army, Navy, Air Force, and Gendarmerie—with a joint strength of 6,700 personnel. Having few offensive capabilities, the FAG's main role is to perform internal security functions and to maintain itself as a credible deterrent against external threats. In recent years the FAG has expanded its activities to include peacekeeping missions, such as the Mission for the Consolidation of Peace in Central African Republic (also known by the acronym MICOPAX).

In 2015 Gabon's defense expenditures totaled $325 million or 1.48% of GDP, which is small compared to a number of other militaries in sub-Saharan Africa. Accordingly, the FAG typically does not undertake major hardware procurements, although it does have armored personnel carriers, other light armored vehicles, and a few combat aircraft.

Unlike some militaries that operate in its region, the FAG has a strong and historically successful commitment to civilian control over the military—apart from a brief, bloodless coup d'état in 1964 (see *History and Myth*). Of note, senior ranks in the military are dominated by officers from the same Téké ethnic group (see "Ethnic Groups" below) as the Bongo family.

Service Branches: Consisting of about 3,200 personnel, the Army, which includes a 1,500-strong Presidential Guard, is the largest branch of the FAG. The Air Force is next with about 1,000 personnel, followed by the Navy with just 500 personnel. Despite its small posture, the Navy appears poised to expand its role as pollution, illegal immigration, and illegal fishing continue to increase in Gabon's territorial waters.

Gendarmerie: Although usually cited as a branch of the FAG, the Gendarmerie is technically a paramilitary force. Consisting of 2,000 personnel, the Gendarmerie has public safety and law enforcement roles during peacetime and contributes to national defense during wartime.

Gabonese Air Force Rank Insignia

Private 1st Class | Lance Corporal | Corporal | Sergeant | Sergeant Major | Warrant Officer II | Warrant Officer I | Chief Warrant Officer | 2nd Lieutenant

Lieutenant | 1st Lieutenant | Captain | 1st Captain | Major | 1st Major | Lieutenant Colonel | 1st Lieutenant Colonel | Colonel | 1st Colonel

Brigadier General | Major General | Lieutenant General | General

Security Issues

Gabon is free of major security issues. No significant non-state armed groups operate in Gabon, while political demonstrations rarely turn violent. There are a few recent exceptions. In 2009 several individuals died in Port-Gentil after riots broke out in protest of election results. In August 2012 several people are suspected to have died during a rally in Libreville celebrating the return to Gabon of an opposition leader. Most recently and recurrently, student protests have occurred every spring for the past several years (see *Learning and Knowledge*).

Crime is Gabon's most significant security issue. Petty crime is widespread, and violent crime, although still relatively rare, is increasing. Rape and armed robbery are most common in Port-Gentil and Libreville, particularly in restaurants, night clubs, and other popular attractions for foreign nationals.

Foreign Relations

Apart from a minor border dispute with Equatorial Guinea (described below), Gabon's foreign relations are positive. Gabon focuses most closely on its ties with other French-speaking countries in Africa, other oil-producing countries on the Gulf of Guinea, and all countries that invest heavily in Gabon's economy (Photo: Jean Ping, a half Chinese-Gabonese diplomat who served as the Foreign Minister of Gabon).

Neighboring Countries: Gabon maintains good relations with Cameroon and the Republic of the Congo, which all share several ethnic groups. Since 1973 Gabon's relations with Equatorial Guinea are more complicated, as the two countries have had an unresolved maritime border dispute in oil-rich Corsico Bay.

Multilateral Relations: Gabon has played an important role in mediating disputes throughout central and French-speaking Africa, especially under the elder President Bongo. Gabon has helped negotiate peace accords in such countries as Angola, Burundi, Chad, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the Republic of the Congo.

In addition, Gabon is a member of multilateral organizations at multiple levels. At the regional level, for example, Gabon is a member of the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), while at the continental level the country belongs to the African Union (AU). Internationally, Gabon is a member of the United Nations (UN), the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), among others.

Gabon-France Relations: Since Gabon gained independence from France in 1960, it has maintained close ties with its former colonial ruler, especially in the military and commercial realms. Gabon is viewed widely as one of France's primary "client states" in central Africa, a designation that bolsters Gabon's influence in the region. The French military provides training to the FAG and maintains a force of about 700 troops in Libreville.

Gabon-US Relations: Gabon has a strong relationship with the US, as evidenced by 5 high-level visits between the two countries since 1987. The US is a major importer of Gabonese oil and manganese, while Gabon acquires much of its machinery, aircraft, and construction equipment from the US. The US also provides Gabon with military training through the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program (Photo: Former President George W. Bush with Carlos Boungou, former Gabonese Ambassador to the US, at the White House in 2008).

Ethnic Groups

At a general level, there are two types of ethnic groups that live in Gabon: Bantu-speakers and Pygmies. Bantu-speakers live in all parts of the country and account for the vast majority of the population, while Pygmies are concentrated in isolated pockets of rainforest and number only a few thousand. While Bantu-speakers divide into more than 40 ethnic groups with distinct languages and customs, the division between the Bantu-speakers and the Pygmies cuts much deeper, as Pygmies are mostly isolated from mainstream Gabonese society.

Bantu-speakers

Of the 40 or so Bantu-speaking ethnic groups, most Gabonese belong to one of the 8 most populous ethnic groups: Eshira, Fang, Kele, Kota, Myene (includes Mpongwe and Orungu sub-groups), Nzebi, Punu, and Téké (Note: The prefix ***ba-*** means "people of" in Bantu languages and is sometimes appended to the names of Bantu-speaking ethnic groups. Consequently, the Téké, for example, are sometimes called the "Batéké").

Gabon's Bantu-speaking ethnic groups share many similarities: they use the same farming techniques, eat the same diet, and have a similar standard of living. Consequently, ethnic divisions are not as distinct in Gabon as in many other African countries. Ethnic conflict is rare, and interethnic marriage is common. Still, each group has a distinct personality and sometimes even unique ceremonial occasions and practices.

Constituting about 1/3 of Gabon's population, the Fang are the country's largest ethnic group and live mostly in the Northeast. The Téké—the ethnic group of the Bongo family—and the Nzebi dominate the Southeast, while the Punu and Eshira live in the Southwest. These latter 4 ethnic groups jointly comprise a share of the population roughly equal to that of the Fang. The Kele, who live near Port-Gentil, and the Myene, who live in central Gabon, account for most of the remainder. The Kota live mostly in the Northeast.

Pygmies

Pygmies are thought to have been Gabon's first inhabitants (see *History and Myth*), where most of them still live as hunter-gatherers in the country's northeastern forests. Due to their isolation and small population size, Pygmies are poorly integrated into modern Gabon where the Bantu-speaking majority often marginalizes them (see *Language and Communication*). In addition to suffering discrimination, many Pygmies live in severe poverty and lack access to basic services such as education and healthcare (Photo: A group of Baka Pygmy dancers in eastern Cameroon).

Other Groups

In addition to indigenous Pygmies and Bantu-speakers, Gabon has significant expatriate communities from France and various African countries. The French community is thought to consist of 5,000-10,000 expatriates who work primarily in the export industry. The African expatriate community is much larger—estimates range from 100,000-200,000—consisting mainly of people from Benin, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Mali, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Senegal. Most African expatriates work as merchants, manual laborers, or in services.

Refugees: Gabon has a small refugee population that lives mainly in urban areas. Many of those refugees are Congolese who fled to Gabon in the late 1990s. In mid-2011 the status of 9,500 refugees expired. Consequently, Gabon worked with the UN and the Republic of the Congo to help them repatriate, remain in Gabon, or resettle in another country. Although most of the refugees chose to remain in Gabon, about 700 chose to repatriate to the Republic of the Congo.

Social Relations

Like many other aspects of Gabon, the country's social relations have been shaped by natural resource income. Although that income has transformed Gabon into a middle-income country on par with Malaysia, Mexico, and Turkey in per capita GDP, it also has enabled the emergence of stark social and economic disparities in Gabonese society. In recent years Gabon has become a bipolar economy, in which there is a small, wealthy elite and a large underclass that struggles survive—although not to the same degree as many Africans.

Nowhere are these disparities more apparent than in Libreville, the country's classy, modern capital, where shantytowns full of makeshift huts and migrant laborers stand in the shadow of glitzy apartment buildings. Whereas the elite drive luxury cars and shop in supermarkets stocked with imported food, the far more numerous poor are left to deal with painfully high prices.

Outside the capital, the situation is not much better than in the shantytowns. Although most villagers in Gabon have at least some familiarity with farming techniques, the government has invested little in agriculture and instead has funded industrial infrastructure. Consequently, lack of employment in rural areas has forced Gabon to import most of its food supply. In addition, many rural Gabonese have little access to education and healthcare because the government has failed to extend many public services into rural areas.

These economic disparities are linked to social inequities. For example, the educated elites speak comparatively unaccented Parisian French—a mark of distinction—while the remainder of the population speaks a version of French heavily influenced by indigenous tongues (see *Language and Communication*). Similarly, Gabon's economic disparities have contributed to a status-conscious attitude in society. For example, bureaucrats who have very little actual power may nonetheless treat those who have no power with scorn and condescension.

Visits

Personal interaction with friends and loved ones is the main source of cohesion in Gabonese society. In urban areas, Gabonese usually confine their visits to evenings and weekends, planning those visits ahead of time due to their busier schedules. In rural areas, by contrast, visits usually are unplanned and can occur at any time of day, although the time after Sunday church services is most popular.

Hospitality is an important aspect of visits in Gabon. Hosts typically offer their guests a drink and also food if the visit occurs during a mealtime. Guests are expected to at least sample the food and drink to demonstrate their appreciation for their host's hospitality. Although guests do not have to bring gifts or even arrive on time, they typically are expected to return the invitation at a later date.

3. RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

Overview

Most Gabonese are Christian, with estimates ranging from 55% to 75% of the population. Muslims constitute an estimated 5-10% of the population. Another 5-10% of Gabonese practice only traditional religion, while many others combine traditional beliefs and practices with Christianity and Islam. About 5% of the population expresses no religious preference.

Gabon's constitution and other laws protect religious freedom, while the government recognizes Christianity, Islam, and ***Bwiti*** (see "***Bwiti***" below) as official religions. The elder President Bongo's conversion to Islam in 1973 (see *History and Myth*) seems to have done little to encourage the faith among native Gabonese, as most Muslims in Gabon today are immigrants from other African countries.

Traditional Beliefs

Before missionaries introduced Christianity in the 19th century, most Gabonese practiced animism, the belief that the spirit of life or consciousness resides in all objects, both animate and inanimate. According to animism, all natural objects—for example, trees and animals—are sacred, a conviction which establishes a close connection between animists and their environment. Most animists also believe that the spirits of their ancestors participate in daily life by guiding or obstructing human behavior.

Each ethnic group traditionally had rituals to promote healing, cast out evil spirits, and mark birth, death, and adulthood. Some ethnic groups still have such rituals, many of which involve communication with spirits of ancestors to whom people made offerings of food and wine. Rituals also usually involved music making, drumming, singing, and dancing. Many Gabonese carved elaborate masks that were worn during funerals or other rituals (Photo: A Fang mask).

Some ethnic groups carved ***bieri*** boxes (pictured) as repositories for the remains of ancestors which they consulted before hunting or making war. Other ethnic groups supported religious societies that focused on one aspect of spiritual beliefs, such as identifying sorcerers and practitioners of witchcraft or receiving healing instructions from the spirit world.

Christianity

Introduction of Christianity

Although Roman Catholicism arrived with the Portuguese in the 15th century (see *History and Myth*), there were no organized missionary efforts before the 19th century. Many missionaries of that era, both Protestant and Catholic, were inspired by humanitarian concerns. Accordingly, they protested slavery and worked to transliterate indigenous languages into the Latin alphabet, making education available to some Gabonese.

Notwithstanding, many of the same missionaries considered indigenous cultures as uncivilized, believing it was their Christian duty to share Western civilization with the Gabonese. Dismissive of indigenous practices and beliefs, most missionaries encouraged their converts to adopt Western-style gender roles, family structures, housing, clothing, patterns of work, and agricultural practices.

The first missionaries to arrive in Gabon were American Protestants from Boston. In 1842 they established a mission called Baraka in the lands of King Glass—the center of British, American, and German commerce. Later, the city of Libreville grew up around Baraka and neighboring settlements.

This action spurred the French government to establish a fort nearby to protect its commercial interests. In 1844 it brought in Catholic missionaries to promote both Catholicism and French cultural influence among the population. Although progress was slow for several decades due to death and illness in their ranks, the French missionaries doggedly expanded their

presence through the late 19th century. In 1899 the first Gabonese was ordained as a Catholic priest, and by 1900, there were about 15,000 Roman Catholics in Gabon (Photo: A Fang convert in the early 20th century).

The French and American missionaries generally saw each other as competitors for Gabonese souls, while the competition expanded into arenas other than religion. At Baraka, American missionaries opened the first Western-style school in Equatorial Africa (see *Learning and Knowledge*). In 1883 the French administration closed the American schools, which had been teaching in English and local languages, ordering that they remain closed unless they used French-speaking teachers from Europe.

As a result, the Americans largely transferred their work to French Protestants. The network of churches that emerged from this outreach, primarily in the northern part of the country, merged as the independent Evangelical Church of Gabon in 1961. In the South the Protestant churches that formed under the guidance of other missionaries combined to form the Evangelical Church of South Gabon in 1959.

Local Response: Gabonese responded to the activities of Christian missionaries in various ways. Some young Gabonese converted quickly to Christianity, taking advantage of the access that some missionaries could offer to marriage partners, Western-style education, and economic opportunities. Other Gabonese accepted some aspects of Christianity but combined them with traditional beliefs and practices.

For example, feeling the pressures imposed by colonial society in the early 20th century, a group of Fang founded the ***Bwiti*** movement. They combined aspects of their own ancient ancestor rites with certain Catholic beliefs and the traditional initiation ceremonies of the Babongo and Mitsogo (Pygmy) people. A revitalization movement that emphasized tradition, ***Bwiti*** provided members with a connection to the past while reassuring them of a place in the future. Because ***Bwiti***

members were persecuted by both colonial and Catholic authorities, the movement also served to unite the Fang politically. By the mid-20th century, the ***Bwiti*** movement was active and well established in many parts of present-day Gabon (see Religion Today, Indigenous beliefs below). Of note, the country's first President Léon M'ba was an initiate of the ***Bwiti*** movement (Photo: A Gabonese family in the early 20th century).

Religion Today

Christianity

Today there are approximately twice as many Roman Catholics as Protestants in Gabon. Attending church is a popular social occasion for Gabonese Christians, especially women and girls. African elements such as music and dance infuse both Catholic and Protestant services, which are often held in indigenous languages (see *Language and Communication*).

While some bishops are Gabonese, the Catholic Church still relies heavily on foreign clergy, in particular the French Holy Ghost Fathers. By contrast, Gabon's largest Protestant church, the Evangelical Church of Gabon, has been able to staff its churches primarily with Gabonese pastors.

Other Christian churches include the Evangelical Church of South Gabon, located primarily in the South, the Christian Alliance Church, based in the Southwest and in coastal cities, and the Evangelical Pentecostal Church (Assembly of God) and Seventh-Day Adventist Church, both found in the Gabon River estuary and far northern regions.

Islam

Most Gabonese Muslims are immigrants from other African countries (see *Political and Social Relations*). As of early 2013, the Grand Imam of Gabon—Ismael Oceni Ossa—is also the Chairman of the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs of Gabon, although the positions are not always held by the same person. The Council and all its affiliated organizations are forbidden by charter from commenting on or participating in any political

activities. The Council and President Bongo—himself a past Chairman—recently emphasized this stance.

Indigenous Religion

For many Gabonese, even those who identify as Christian or Muslim, a traditional worldview infuses daily life. For some, this fusion is formalized in membership in a syncretic religious movement such as the ***Bwiti*** movement.

Bwiti: Today, the ***Bwiti*** movement, known as *Eglise de Banzie* or the Church of the Initiates, has 2-3 million followers in Africa and 60,000-100,000 in Gabon. The central ritual of the church is a multiple-day initiation rite that all members must undergo. The goal of the initiation rite is to achieve "one-heartedness" or a sense of community with God, ancestors, and other church members. Other shorter rituals are held each week, while the most important ceremonies are held on Christmas and Easter.

A ritual specialist called an ***n'ganga*** leads ***Bwiti*** ceremonies in specially designed wooden temples. Participants typically dress in distinctive costumes and decorate their faces or bodies with white clay. ***Bwiti*** rituals constitute a mix of playing instruments, dancing, singing, and consuming ***iboga***, the bark of a root that causes hallucinations (see *Sustenance and Health*). Through the use of ***iboga***, church members enter the spirit world and seek the advice of ancestors in order to enhance their self-knowledge and connection to God. In some ***Bwiti*** groups, communication with the ancestors focuses on identifying the causes and possible cures for an illness.

Ritual Killings

Gabon's Association to Fight Ritual Crimes identified 62 cases of so-called ritual killings in 2010 in which the limbs or genitals primarily of children were amputated. It is widely believed that men, often politicians, seeking power and good fortune perform these killings to use the body parts in rituals. Although officials in Gabon's government have condemned the killings vigorously, there has been little action in the way of public investigation or prosecution for ritual killings.

4. FAMILY AND KINSHIP

Overview

The family is the basic unit of Gabonese society. From birth to death, family relationships constitute one of the most important aspects of daily life. Gabonese are loyal to their families and will not hesitate to provide food, lodging, or financial support to family members in need, even for a prolonged period of time.

Family Structure

Although men head most Gabonese households, Gabonese women often have strong opinions about family matters and play an important role in decisionmaking. Historically, men have been responsible for hunting, handling business transactions, and building the family home, while women prepare food, raise children, and perform other domestic tasks. Still, raising children traditionally has been shared among the entire family, including aunts, uncles, and older siblings.

Clans: Clans, which are groups of people linked by a common ancestor, are the largest divisions within Gabon's ethnic groups (see *Political and Social Relations*), functioning as an extension of family relationships. Members of the same clan traditionally have lived in close proximity to each other. Different clans have tended to alternate between periods of alliance and conflict with each other.

Historically, the clans of southern Gabon have been matrilineal, meaning they trace descent through the mother's line, while the clans of northern Gabon have been patrilineal, tracing their descent through the father's line. Today, most clans are patrilineal due to the combined effects of urbanization and migration and the accompanying blending of cultures. As members of the same clan are considered relatives, Gabonese only date and marry people from outside their clans (a practice known as "clan exogamy").

Polygyny: The practice of a man having multiple wives at the same time, polygyny is both legal and acceptable in Gabon. Most men cannot afford to support multiple wives, as doing so means paying bridewealth (see "Bridewealth" below) and buying a home for each wife. Consequently, men more commonly marry just one woman while maintaining mistresses as secondary partners.

Children: To offset a historically small population (see *Political and Social Relations*), childbearing is encouraged in Gabonese society where children are considered a symbol of status and wealth. Marriages are not considered final until the woman has borne at least one child, and women commonly bear children before marriage in order to prove their fertility.

Residence

Since housing is limited and most family members live close to each other in Gabon, residences tend to be large enough to accommodate a number of people. In a typical Gabonese home, there are separate gathering areas for men and women. The wife (or each wife if the home is polygynous) has a ***cuisine***, which consists of a kitchen and several benches for visiting and sleeping. Men socialize in the ***corps de gard***, an outdoor courtyard with a fireplace. With little private space, several children may share a single bed.

The construction of Gabonese homes differs between rural and urban areas. In rural areas, extended families usually reside in compounds composed of several semi-permanent structures, which have roofs made of palm fronds and walls made of brick, bamboo, or wattle and daub (woven strips of wood bonded with clay or mud). More luxurious rural homes may have electricity, plumbing, or walls made from cinder blocks.

In urban areas, even modest residences usually are built from cinder blocks and have roofs made of corrugated iron. Many urban homes also have appliances such as radios, TVs, and satellite dishes (see *Technology and Material*).

Due to urbanization, housing shortages have become a major issue in Gabon in recent years. With housing development a priority while campaigning for the Presidency in 2009, President Ali Bongo Ondimba has committed to building 5,000 new housing units annually (see *Political and Social Relations*). While Bongo's intent was to bring Gabon closer to ending homelessness, many of those homes have yet to be built due to corruption, land use issues, and administrative constraints.

Rites of Passage

Gabonese observe certain ceremonies to mark the various stages of life.

Birth and Infancy: Due to the high risk of miscarriage, families do not usually announce the arrival of a child until it is born and confirmed healthy. Upon confirmation, they typically hold a celebration at which the mother and child receive gifts, and the child is given a name—usually that of a relative or ancestor. Children typically remain close to their mothers during their early years of life. During the day, they are strapped to their mother's back with a strip of cloth so that the mother's hands remain free to perform other tasks. At night, children usually sleep next to their mother in the same bed (Photo: Bakoya Pygmy child, courtesy of UN News & Media/Gill Fickling).

Circumcision: Some boys participate in circumcision rituals headed by clan elders. The boys are dressed in colorful skirts and escorted to the ceremonial location where the procedure is performed. Afterwards, the boys receive gifts and money at a special celebration. Unlike other parts of Africa where female circumcision is practiced, Gabonese girls rarely are circumcised (see *Sex and Gender*).

Dating and Courtship

Dating is most common in Gabon among the educated, urban elite. Young people attend movies, restaurants, and dance clubs where they choose their own partners. In rural areas, a "date" might entail a boy visiting a girl's home while her parents are present. It is customary in rural areas for family members to arrange matches.

Marriage

Gabonese traditionally consider marriage the union not just of two people but also of two families, and nearly everyone in Gabon is married upon reaching adulthood. Due to the high cost of bridewealth (see below), many modern couples elect not to legally wed and instead live together in the equivalent of a common law marriage. Since a man's status traditionally was linked to the number of dependents he had—including wives, children, in-laws, servants, and cattle—Gabonese men often have children with multiple partners (see "Polygyny" above).

Bridewealth: The groom's family traditionally gives the bride's family "bridewealth," consisting of money or gifts to signify the groom's commitment and compensate for the loss of the bride's labor. In most cases, bridewealth is paid before marriage. In a minority of ethnic groups such as the Fang, bridewealth only needs to be paid before the birth of the first child. In all ethnic groups, a widow traditionally marries her brother-in-law, since the family of her deceased spouse already has paid bridewealth (Photo: Gabonese woman with a basket of cassava).

Death

Although burial traditions vary, funerals are significant for all Gabonese. Traditionally, the deceased is kept in the family home following death, where friends and family gather to grieve and pray over the body. Due to Gabon's intense heat and humidity (see *Political and Social Relations*), remains are buried within 1-2 days of death, usually near the ancestors of the deceased. At the burial, friends and family tell stories about the deceased and may stay with the family for a week or more.

A period of mourning then begins, during which women who had been close to the deceased wear old, tattered clothing to signify their grief. In some communities, additional mourning rituals occur 30 days after the funeral. After several months or sometimes up to 1 year, Gabonese observe a ceremony called ***retrait de deuil*** ("withdrawal of mourning"), a happy celebration that involves feasting, music, and dancing.

5. SEX AND GENDER

Overview

Although Gabonese society remains male-dominated, Gabon has made significant progress toward gender equality in law and politics. The country also is relatively free of problematic practices that occur in some parts of Africa, such as female circumcision and discrimination against homosexuals.

Gender Roles and Work

In traditional Gabonese households, men and women were responsible for distinct tasks. Men hunted, fished, sold cash crops, handled family finances, and built a family home, while women grew crops for the family food supply, prepared meals, took care of children, and performed other household tasks. In some rural areas of Gabon, labor is still divided in a similar way between the sexes, a situation that is reinforced by the fact that many rural women lack education and job skills necessary to find jobs outside the home.

Contemporary women now comprise about 64% of Gabon's labor force, primarily in the services sector. Some women also serve in the military (see *Economics and Resources*). Men still dominate managerial and decision-making roles. Although the law requires that both genders be paid equally for similar work, women typically earn lower wages than men. In addition, many Gabonese employers prefer to hire men, who are perceived as more able than women to handle strenuous labor. Similarly, women are barred from night work and mining jobs.

Human Trafficking: Due to its relative wealth and prosperity, Gabon is a common destination for human trafficking victims. Most girls and women who are trafficked to Gabon are sexually exploited or used as domestic servants. Although prostitution is illegal, there are no reliable statistics regarding its prevalence.

Gender and Politics

Although traditional conceptions of gender continue to limit the role of Gabonese women in politics, they are entitled legally to take part in political affairs on an equal basis with men. Consequently, there have been female members in all branches of Gabon's government. In the legislative branch, women account for 17% of the National Assembly and 19% of the Senate. These levels are similar to those in the US Congress, in which 18% of legislators are female (Photo: Former First Lady Laura Bush meeting Former First Lady Edith Lucie Bongo Ondimba of Gabon in 2004).

In the executive and judicial branches, women have served in a range of senior positions, including Minister of Justice, Minister of Family and Social Affairs, and President of the Constitutional Court. Outside the government, there are many female activist organizations that work for social justice and equality.

Gender and the Law

Although Gabon has enacted several laws to protect the rights of women in recent years, many of those laws are ambiguous, inconsistently enforced, or overridden by traditional attitudes. For example, while a single woman may own property and legally retain those rights in marriage if specified in the marriage contract, her land often is treated as if it belongs to her husband. Similarly, women as with men may obtain loans, although some banks require women to obtain the consent of their husband. Finally, while men are entitled to divorce adulterous wives, women do not have a corresponding right.

Gender Based Violence (GBV)

Rape and other forms of GBV are criminal offenses in Gabon and can result in penalties of 5-15 years imprisonment and up to $40,000 in fines. Many cases are not prosecuted, however, because the victims are too ashamed to report their attackers or seek medical treatment. For the same reason, there are no reliable statistics on the occurrence of rape and GBV in Gabon, although both crimes are believed to be widespread.

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

FGM is the deliberate modification of the female sex organs in order to reduce sexual desire and promote virginity. FGM is not widely practiced in Gabon, and while illegal there, incidents do occur usually among African expatriates residing in Gabon.

Sex and Procreation

Gabonese generally have a casual attitude toward sexual relations. Both genders typically start having sex at an early age and with multiple partners before marriage (see *Family and Kinship*). A 2015 study indicates that 80% of males and 702% of females age 15-19 had had sex already, even though only 4% of males and 19% of females were married at that age. Because of Gabon's sparse population (see *Political and Social Relations*), the government tries to encourage large families. Contraceptives, for example, were illegal until 2009, and many women still have limited access to information about family planning. Only about 48% of women use contraceptives, of which 88% use only traditional methods.

Droit de Seigneur

Some Gabonese clans traditionally practiced ***droit de seigneur*** ("the right of the lord"), a custom in which clan leaders had the traditional right to assume control of all females' virginity in the area under their control. This practice usually led to transmission of sexual infections, which in turn resulted in health conditions linked to infertility, such as pelvic inflammatory disease and blockage of the fallopian tubes. This practice may be one reason why even today about 32% of Gabonese women suffer from infertility.

Homosexuality

Although homosexuality is legal in Gabon, outward displays of homosexual affection are frowned upon. Consequently, many homosexuals in Gabon hide their orientation and instead marry and have families as heterosexuals. In contrast to the ages of consent for heterosexuals, which are 15 for women and 18 for men, the age of consent for homosexuals is 21.

6. LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

Language Overview

As with ethnic groups, there are more than 40 languages spoken in Gabon, and nearly all are indigenous Bantu or Pygmy vernaculars belonging to the Niger-Congo language family. Because of the notable differences in these many dialects, French—Gabon's former colonial language—serves as a *lingua franca* that allows Gabonese of different ethnicities to communicate. Still, most rural Gabonese live in homogeneous ethnic enclaves and therefore use local languages for commerce and daily life.

Fang

Around 30% of Gabon's population speaks Fang, which is the country's most common indigenous language. Most Fang-speakers are members of the Fang ethnic group (see *Political and Social Relations*) primarily concentrated in northern Gabon, southern Cameroon, and Equatorial Guinea. Like Gabon's other indigenous languages, Fang belongs to the Niger-Congo family, although there is no consensus among scholars whether Fang is a Bantu language (see below). Despite its appeal, many inhabitants contend that Fang is not spoken widely enough in public life (Photo: Fang Christians in 1912).

Bantu Languages

Although Fang is the country's most widely spoken indigenous language, most of Gabon's indigenous languages are Bantu languages. Bantu languages are spoken throughout most of sub-Saharan Africa and are characterized by certain consonant groupings, such as "nz" (as in *Nzabi*) and "mb" (as in *Mbete*), and by open, round vowel pairs, as in the phrase *antsia ama*. There was no written form of Gabon's Bantu languages until the 19th century, when missionaries began transcribing them to facilitate religious education (see *Learning and Knowledge*).

Scholars classify the 40 Bantu languages spoken in Gabon into 10 groups, although both those groups and the languages that constitute them have changed over time due to war, migration, and other social forces. Some examples of the groups include the Eshira, Kele, Kota, Myéné, Mbédé, and Nzabi.

Pygmy Languages

Gabonese Pygmies (see *Political and Social Relations*)—including the Babongo, the Baka, and the Bakoya—mostly speak Bantu languages of neighboring ethnic groups. Most Bakoya, for example, speak Koya, a dialect of the Bantu language Ngom, although some also speak French or other Bantu languages, such as Kwele and Kota.

The primary non-Bantu tongue spoken by Gabon's Pygmies is Baka, the language of a group of the same name that inhabits parts of Gabon, Cameroon, the Republic of the Congo, and the Central African Republic. Although Baka belongs to the Niger-Congo language family, it belongs to the Ubangi rather than the Bantu branch. Despite the existence of a Baka language, many Baka now speak Fang, which is more popular and therefore more effective for communicating with other ethnic groups.

French

French is Gabon's primary language of business, education, government, and media. Most Gabonese speak at least some French in addition to their indigenous language. French was introduced to Gabon in 1839, when French traders began negotiating treaties with local chiefs (see *History and Myth*). Although French was named the language of instruction in 1883 (see *Learning and Knowledge*), it was taught only to a small minority of Gabon's indigenous population until after World War II.

Since no ethnic group formed a majority when Gabon attained independence in 1960, French became the official language. Many Gabonese now speak the language fluently, but some older, rural Gabonese still speak "Moussa French," a variant that incorporates the vocabulary and rhythm of local tongues. Most Moussa French speakers never studied French formally.

Communication Overview

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

Communication Style

Although Gabonese generally are friendly and outgoing, they may seem reserved initially due to their view that speaking too much with a stranger is impolite in some circumstances. Consequently, a Gabonese host may wait before starting a conversation with unfamiliar guests. Nevertheless, friendships form quickly in Gabon, especially between people who meet through a family member.

Gabonese are viewed by some people—even other Africans in the region—as aggressive and direct. Indeed, many indigenous languages do not have words for "please" and "thank you." These words are omitted not because Gabonese people are ungrateful, but rather because helping friends and relatives is considered an obligation rather than a courtesy. In lieu of saying "thank you," Gabonese usually return favors with an equivalent favor at a later date.

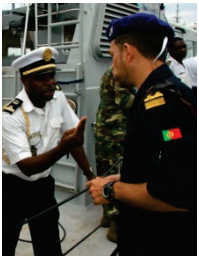
Greetings

Gabonese typically shake hands and smile when greeting someone, even if they already have greeted the same person earlier in the day. Some women exchange greetings by grasping forearms, while other women offer ***bisous*** (French-style cheek kisses) or touch cheeks and make a kissing noise. Men have a somewhat similar greeting custom in which they touch heads temple-to-temple. Men also sometimes hold hands for entire conversations.

Verbal Greetings: French greetings such as *Bonjour* (Good day) and *Comment allez-vous?* (How are you?) are acceptable in most contexts. The greetings *M'bolo* (1 person) and *M'bolani* (multiple people)—originally from the coastal Myene ethnic group—also are used widely by Gabonese of all ethnic groups.

Forms of Address

Gabonese usually address elders as *Mama* or *Papa* followed by their first name. Similarly, peers often are addressed as *mon frère* (my brother) or *ma soeur* (my sister) followed by their first name. In places of work and other formal contexts, the titles *Monsieur* (Mr.) and *Madame* (Mrs.) are appropriate.



Gestures

Like most people around the world, Gabonese use gestures to emphasize or substitute for spoken words. The "thumbs up" sign, for example, means "good" or "okay," just as it does in the US. However, other gestures may be unfamiliar to foreign nationals. Instead of pointing, for example, Gabonese pucker their lips and then point them in the appropriate direction. Similarly, instead of simply holding an arm up, Gabonese hail taxis by making a hissing noise and stretching out an arm with the index finger pointed toward the ground.

Gabonese also use several other gestures. To indicate a large quantity, one may hit a closed left fist lightly against the right palm. To confirm that something is true, one may place the right thumbnail behind the front teeth and then snap the thumbnail forward. To show enthusiasm, one may quickly shake the wrist up and down while keeping the fingers close together and hitting them against the inside of the palm. Finally, to beckon someone, one may hold out a flat hand with the palm down and then wave the fingers toward oneself in unison.

Language Training Resources

Please view the Air Force Culture and Language Center website at http://culture.af.mil/resources/index.aspx for language training resources.

Useful Translations

Note: When interacting with non-English-speaking Gabonese, foreign nationals should speak French or Fang if certain that the Gabonese speaks Fang.

English	French	Fang
Hello	Bonjour	M'bolo/M'bolani
Goodbye	Au revoir	Mengakeyang
How are you?	Comment allez-vous?	Y'o num vah?
I am fine	Bien	M'a num vah
What is your name?	Comment vous appelez vous?	One ewola ya?
My name is ___	Je m'appelle ___	Mene ewola naha ___
I am pleased to meet you	Enchanté	Akibah ne meyemwoah
Yes	Oui	Ahaa
No	Non	Kaha / Moamo
Please	S'il vous plaît	Engungo
Thank you	Merci	Akiba
You are welcome	De rien	Asedjam
I'm sorry	Désolé/Excusez-moi	Djuima
What did you say?	Qu'est-ce que vous disez?	Wa dzon ah dzeh?
Repeat (it)	Répétez	Beryabaale
I do not speak Fang/French	Je ne parle pas Fang/français	Ma kobe ki Fang/French
Who?	Qui?	Zaha?
What?	Quoi?	Djé?
When?	Quand?	Odén?
Where?	Où?	Vé?
Why?	Pourquoi?	Amudjé?
Help!	Au secours!	Maayi Nvoraaan!
Right	À droite	Méyohom
Left	À gauche	Méyaha
Straight ahead	Droit	Téhetele
Stop!	Arrêtez!	Tébeye!

7. LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE

Literacy

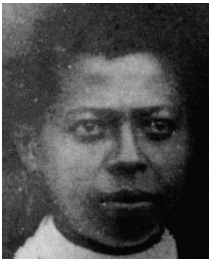
- Total population over age 15 who can read and write: 83.2%
- Male: 85.3%
- Female: 81% (2015 estimate)

Traditional Education

Gabon's early inhabitants used a variety of methods for transmitting knowledge. Education was typically informal and delivered orally from elders to younger members of society. Subject matter included practical skills, such as agriculture and hunting, as well as morals and values. Some clans also used stories involving animals to teach moral principles.

Gabonese also used traditional methods to transfer knowledge between groups. For example, Baka Pygmies taught the Fang how to hunt and cultivate honey after the Fang arrived from the North in the 19th century (see *History and Myth*).

Mvets*:** The Fang are well known for ***mvets—poems that detail journeys of mythical heroes battling with imaginary creatures and the forces of nature. ***Mvets*** usually included genealogical, historical, cultural, and moral lessons. Although some ***mvets*** once were guarded closely and restricted to initiated members of a given clan, an increasing number have been recorded in recent years in an effort to preserve vanishing oral traditions.



Introduction of Formal Education

The first formal, Western-style schools established in Gabon were created by two Protestant American missionaries in the mid-19th century (see *Religion and Spirituality*). The stated goal of these missionaries was to spread Christianity and to train an African lay ministry (Photo: Raponda Walker, the first Catholic priest of Gabonese descent). In pursuit of this goal, the missionaries wrote grammar books and hymnals in the local language (see *Language and Communication*).

It was not long before the American Protestants were joined by French Catholics. In 1844 Frère Jean Rémi Bessieux, a French Catholic priest, established the Congregation of the Holy Ghost Spiritans, which was the colony's first boys' school (Pictured: The Congregation's crest). In the same year, the Brothers of Saint-Gabriel established École Montfort, a boys' school now well known for educating many Gabonese politicians. In 1849 the Immaculate Conception Sisters of Castres founded a girls' school.

French administrators (see *History and Myth*) provided money to the mission schools but did not regulate what they taught until 1883, when French was declared the sole language of instruction. In 1905 political movements in Europe led France to mandate the separation of church and state in both France and French colonies. While the mission schools lost funding that year, France later opened public schools in 1907.

Enrollment was low until the years following World War II, when the colony began to receive more aid from France. Enrollments in primary school soared from 9,000 in 1945 to 50,000 in 1959, although many pupils only remained in school for a few years.

Education after Independence

When Gabon attained independence in 1960, few Gabonese had the educational background to become teachers or government officials. While the government established programs to train the required staff, Gabon's education system remained dependent upon French aid for many years.

Modern Education System

Primary: Primary education is compulsory in Gabon. It starts at age 6, lastingfor 6 years. Although French is the language of instruction, students who are not familiar with French have a year to learn the language. Upon completion of primary school, students receive the ***certificat d'etudes*** (certificate of studies) and sit for the ***concours d'entrée en sixième***, an exam that determines their placement in secondary school.

Secondary: Secondary education in Gabon consists of 2 levels. ***Collège***, the lower level, is similar to middle school in the US. It extends for 4 years and is compulsory. Similar to high school in the US, ***Lycée*** is not mandatory and continues for 3 years. Students at the upper level choose between 3 courses of study: general, vocational, and technical. General studies prepare students for ***le baccalaureat***, an exam used for university admissions. Only 30-40% of students who take "***le bac***" pass the exam. In addition to the standard ***lycées***, there are specialized ***lycées*** that prepare students for work in the oil and mining industries.

Post-Secondary: The National University of Gabon, now the *Université Omar Bongo* (UOB), was established in 1970. UOB initially had a wide range of faculties, including arts, economics, engineering, health sciences, law, science, and technology, although many of them seceded to form independent universities. The technology faculty, for example, founded the University of Science and Technology in Masuku in 1986, while the health sciences faculty founded the University of Health Sciences in 2002. Despite these departures, UOB in 2015 had 17,000 students, 350 faculty, and 17 Master's programs.

In addition to universities, there are a range of professional and technical schools. The *Ecole Normale Supérieure*, for example, is devoted to teacher training, while the *Institut National des Sciences de Gestion* offers training in business administration. There also are schools linked to Gabon's main industries (see *Economics and Resources*). For example, the *Ecole Nationale d'Etudes Forestières á Cap Estérias* trains students in forestry.

Although the government still offers funding for study abroad, it also has established partnerships to develop higher education in Gabon. For example, the Franco-American Management Academy and other universities in Europe and the US have partnered with institutions in Gabon to offer advanced degrees in biology, environmental studies, forestry, and management.

Challenges to the Education System

Despite improvements since independence, Gabon's public education system still faces several challenges. For example, although enrollment now stands at 94%—with equal male and female representation—the dropout rate from primary school is about 44%. Of those who complete primary school, about 30% do not finish secondary school. Even those who stick with their education often require more time than normal to complete their degrees—about 25% of secondary students and 75% of university students.

Investment in education remains low, especially in primary and secondary education. Gabon spends the equivalent of 3.9% of GDP on education, which is below average both regionally and globally. Class sizes range from 40-60 students, and resources are scarce in many parts of Gabon. Also, lack of housing near schools impacts teacher absenteeism at a rate of about 40%.

Student Activism

Gabonese students have protested for higher quality education at many different times in the past. In 1990, for example, student demonstrations against the lack of computer equipment in schools led to the deaths of 5 students. More recently, 2 universities in Libreville, including UOB, have been rocked by periodic student protests since early 2012. The protests originally focused on unpaid scholarships and later expanded to include grievances about inadequate air-conditioning, electricity, Internet access, and libraries. In the spring of 2013, Gabonese police used tear gas to disperse student protestors after some students began setting fire to tires and barricading streets.

Private Schools

Since many public schools in Gabon tend to offer low-quality education, some Gabonese parents prefer to send their children to private schools. While private education in the country traditionally has been offered by religious institutions, several secular private schools have opened in recent years.

8. TIME AND SPACE

Concept of Time

Like many Africans, Gabonese have a relaxed attitude toward time and prefer to focus less on the clock than on the people around them. In urban areas, many Gabonese have adopted a more Western-style view of time as a finite resource.

Time and Work

A typical workweek in Gabon extends from Monday through Friday, with business hours of 7:30am-6:00pm. Those hours include a 2-hour break during the hottest part of the day, which occurs around 1:00pm-3:00pm. Banks have a slightly different schedule, as they tend to close at 4:30pm on weekdays and open for a half day on Saturdays. In 2010 Gabon created a “continued working day” policy for all government workers. Under this policy, the day ends 3 hours earlier at 3:00pm, while lunch is curtailed from the traditional 2 hours to 30 minutes. Gabon observes West Africa Time (WAT), which is 1 hour ahead of Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) and 6 hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time (EST).

Punctuality

Times, dates, and appointments are not as important to most Gabonese as they are to Westerners, although there are some exceptions among urbanites and business people. Even when friends and relatives make appointments with each other, they generally are not tied to a specific date or timeFor example, people often are delayed in Gabon due to poor road conditions.

Holidays

Although most Gabonese are Christian, Gabon also observes Islamic holidays (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Businesses and government offices usually are closed on both religious and secular holidays (see “Public Holidays”). Formal sector workers in Gabon typically receive 2 days of paid leave per month.

Public Holidays

- Jan 1: ***Jour de l'An*** (New Year's Day)
- Mar 12: Day of Renewal
- Mar – Apr (variable): ***Pâcques*** (Easter)
- May 1: ***Fête du Travail*** (Labor Day)
- May – Jun (variable): Ascension
- May – Jun (variable): Pentecost Monday
- Aug 15: Assumption
- Aug 17: ***Fête Nationale*** (Independence Day)
- Nov 1: ***Toussaint*** (All Saints' Day)
- Dec 25: ***Nöel*** (Christmas Day)

Islamic Holidays (see "Lunar Islamic Calendar")

- ***Mawlid***: Birthday of the Prophet Muhammad
- ***Ramadan***: Holy Month of Fasting
- ***Eid al-Fitr***: End of ***Ramadan***
- ***Eid al-Adha***: The Festival of the Sacrifice

Lunar Islamic Calendar

Muslims in Gabon use the Islamic calendar to calculate when Islamic holidays should be celebrated. Since that calendar is based on the phases of the moon, specific dates fall 11 days earlier each year from the perspective of the Western calendar. There are 12 months in the Islamic calendar, all of which have 30 days or fewer. Days begin at sunset on what Westerners would consider the previous day.

Personal Space

Accustomed to living communally, most Gabonese are comfortable with limited personal space. Nonetheless, they typically respect the personal space of new acquaintances, maintaining a comfortable distance when they are greeting someone new (see *Language and Communication*). Gabonese are especially careful to maintain a courteous separation from people of the opposite gender, although these attitudes are somewhat more relaxed among youth living in urban areas.

Touch

Gabonese commonly exchange handshakes or ***bisous*** (French-style cheek kisses) when greeting each other (see *Language and Communication*). Although people of the same gender tend to be comfortable with casual touching during conversation, members of opposite genders may avoid personal contact in public. Some women, especially those from older generations, may be uncomfortable shaking hands with a man. Male foreign nationals are advised to allow a Gabonese woman to decide whether or not to advance a handshake. It is disrespectful in Gabon to touch someone on the head (US sailor plays game with a Gabonese elementary school student).

Eye Contact

Gabonese are comfortable making and maintaining eye contact during conversation. In some cases, Gabonese stare intently at things that interest them and seem overly aggressive in doing so. This behavior indicates curiosity, not aggression.

Left Hand Taboo

Like people from many cultures in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, Gabonese use the left hand primarily for personal hygiene and therefore consider it unclean. Consequently, they use the right hand when eating, gesturing, accepting items, or greeting another person. Foreign nationals are advised to comply with this tradition in order to avoid offense.

Photographs

Foreign nationals are advised to obtain permission before taking pictures of people in Gabon unless they are congregated in a large group (e.g. in a marketplace). Be advised that Gabonese may expect compensation in exchange for appearing in photographs. Finally, foreign nationals should note that taking pictures of military installations, government buildings, the Presidential Palace, or airports is illegal.

9. AESTHETICS AND RECREATION

Overview

Due to the strong influence of French colonialism and the large variety of ethnic groups in Gabon, the country is home to many different customs related to dress, recreation, music, and the arts. Some of those customs originated in religious beliefs, while more recently Western influences have had an impact.

Dress and Appearance

Traditional: In the traditional culture of some ethnic groups in Gabon, clothing and body adornments indicated wealth, status, and life experiences. Consequently, some people historically wore elaborate clothing, even though most Gabonese limited the amount of clothing they wore due to the country's hot and humid climate (Photo: Gabonese singers and dancers in traditional dress).

The Baka pygmies, for example, historically wore simple loin cloths made from tree vines, which they embellished with stones, beans, and charcoal designs. Similarly, men of the Fang ethnic group historically wore waistcloths made of animal skins, although they also adorned themselves with leopard-tooth necklaces, body tattoos, and artful designs composed of scars. Some Fang men even sharpened their teeth in order to appear fiercer and braver.

Modern: Most Gabonese value a neat and clean appearance. Even individuals who rely upon donated, second-hand clothing generally strive to keep their garments presentable. Gabonese typically reserve their finest clothing for photographs or special events. Although most people in Gabon wear Western styles, their garments often are made from traditional African fabrics and incorporate indigenous designs.

Men: In formal and business contexts, Gabonese men typically wear standard, Western-style work clothes, including trousers, collared shirts, and leather shoes. Jackets usually are shunned because of the heat. In casual contexts, men tend to wear Western-style shirts made from traditional African textiles. Muslim men also sometimes wear a ***boubou***—a loose, long-sleeved cotton tunic that falls mid-calf level and worn over trousers. Most Gabonese men wear their hair neat and closely cropped, although men in rural areas often grow beards.

Women: Most Gabonese women wear fitted dresses or t-shirts with jeans. Some women of middle-age or older also may wear a ***pagne***—a long-wraparound skirt made with brightly colored material—over a matching fitted dress or with a matching head cloth and blouse. Many women braid their hair elaborately, twisting decorative beads into the design.

Recreation and Sports

Although visiting friends and relatives (see *Political and Social Relations*) is probably Gabon's most popular form of recreation, many Gabonese also watch TV (see *Technology and Material*) or play sports and games. For example, the Fang play ***songo***, a form of ***mancala*** in which players move pebbles or seeds between pits on a wooden board. Children play games such as checkers, jump-rope, and tag. Since many Gabonese children lack the equipment needed for some sports and games, they often improvise using recycled materials.

Soccer: Soccer—known throughout Africa as "football"—is Gabon's most popular sport. Founded in 1962, Gabon's national team is known popularly as the ***Azingo Nationale*** or ***Les Panthères*** (The Panthers). Although *Les Panthères* have yet to qualify for the World Cup, they have made 5 appearances in the Africa Cup of Nations, co-hosting the same tournament with Equatorial Guinea in 2012. Gabon also is home to 60 private football clubs, including Libreville's FC Missile (pictured above in a 2008 match against the US Navy Region Europe team).

Other Sports: Other sports with a following in Gabon include basketball, volleyball, hiking, and cycling. Since 2006 Gabon has hosted the *Tropicale Amissa Bongo*, an 8-day cycling race that constitutes a part of the *Union Cycliste Internationale* (UCI) Africa Tour and attracts cyclists from around the world.

Olympics: Gabonese athletes have participated in the Summer Olympics 8 times since 1972, competing in events such as boxing, judo, and track and field. Anthony Obame won Gabon's first medal, a silver in heavyweight taekwondo, at the 2012 Olympics in London.

Music

Famous for its complexity and rhythmic qualities, the traditional music of Gabon is characterized by drums, harps, flutes, and xylophones along with accompanying vocals. The Bakele, for example, traditionally used an 8-stringed harp, while the Fang used the ***mvet***, a stringed instrument that accompanied epic stories of the same name (see *Learning and Knowledge* and "Folklore" below). By contrast, Baka Pygmy music is known for vocals that resemble yodeling.

Modern: In addition to traditional music, Gabonese enjoy modern genres ranging from rap and hip-hop to reggae and ***soukous***, an African version of the rumba that originated in the Congo. Several Gabonese artists have received global attention in recent years. For example, Pierre Akendengué (pictured) is known widely for his socially conscious songs, which blend popular music with African rhythms. His most famous piece—"Lambaréné"—was a tribute to Dr. Albert Schweitzer (see *Sustenance and Health*).

Another notable Gabonese musician is Patience Dabany, the first wife of the elder Bongo and the mother of Gabon's current President. After her divorce in 1988, Dabany produced several solo albums and sang lead for a group known as Kounabeli. Other well-known Gabonese musicians include singers Oliver N'Goma and Didier Ontchanga, guitarists La Rose Mbadou and Sylvain Avara, and rapper Lord Ekomy Ndong.

Festivals

In addition to public holidays (see *Time and Space*), the people of Gabon celebrate several festivals that draw participants from all over Europe and Africa. In addition to local festivals held throughout the year in all regions of Gabon, the country is home to the following music festivals:

- ***Festival Gabao***: This 3-day festival occurs each February in Libreville and showcases hip-hop talent from all around Africa.
- **Festival *Akni-a-Loubou***: This festival, which is held for 2 weeks each May, offers instructional workshops for aspiring dancers.
- ***Les Nuits Atypiques***: Typically held during the last week of August, this festival highlights the music of Gabon's Nyanga region.

Theater

Although the French introduced European-style theater to Gabon during the colonial era, indigenous Gabonese so far have produced little theatrical works. The most famous Gabonese playwright was Vincent de Paul Nyonda, who began writing plays after leaving his job as government official. His best known work is *Le Mort de Guykafi* (The Death of Guykafi), a critique of colonialism wrapped in a dramatized legend.

Cinema

Due partly to the elder Bongo's advocacy (see *History and Myth*), cinema has been successful in Gabon. The country's first cinema actor was Philippe Maury, who produced and wrote such films as *La Cage*, which was featured at the 1963 Cannes Film Festival. Gabon appeared again at Cannes in 2011, when the event included a film about a rapper who finds inspiration in Libreville. US and other foreign films are popular in Gabon, while today DVD players can be found even in remote villages.

Folklore

Most Gabonese ethnic groups have a rich tradition of folklore. T***roubadors***—professional storytellers—traditionally have used stories, riddles, and poetry to preserve the histories and fables of their people. The Fang, for example, are famous for the ***mvet***, a form of epic poetry that chronicles battles between ***Oku*** (mortals) and ***Engong*** (immortals). Although historically the ***mvet*** was a closely guarded art form, a notable ***troubador*** recently published some ***mvets*** in order to help preserve them.

Literature

The earliest known example of published Gabonese literature is *Contes Gabonais* (Gabonese Stories), a collection of stories from various ethnic groups which André Raponda-Walker, the first Catholic priest of Gabonese descent, compiled in 1953. Similar publications followed in the 1970s after the Ministry of Culture was established in 1976.

In the 1980s Gabonese authors began to address social issues. Angèle Ntyungwetondo Rawiri, for example, addressed sorcery and modern womanhood in her novel *Elonga* (1980), while Laurent Owondo—Gabon's most famous author—dealt with social change and identity in *Au but du silence* (At the End of Silence) (1985). Other well-known Gabonese writers include Quentin Ben Mongaryas and Maurice Okoumba-Nkoghe.

Arts and Crafts

Gabonese arts and crafts traditionally have been made for religious purposes. Several Gabonese ethnic groups historically have created elaborate wooden masks (pictured), originally used to provide spiritual protection to deceased ancestors but now are used mostly for decoration. In modern times, Gabonese artisans make a variety of arts and crafts including baskets, ceramics, mats, and cloth made from the fronds of the ***raffia*** palm. Libreville's Mon-Bouet Market is famous for its selection of indigenous arts and crafts. Libreville also is home to the National Museum of Gabon, the International Center for Bantu Civilizations, and the Museum of Arts and Traditions.

10. SUSTENANCE AND HEALTH

Sustenance Overview

Gabon's flavorfully spicy cuisine is the result of both cultural influences from the country's colonial past and the selection of ingredients available in its tropical climate. Since only a small portion of Gabon's land is cultivable (see *Economics and Resources*), the country imports about 80% of its food supply.

Dining Customs

Urban Gabonese eat mostly with utensils and use their hands only for certain foods, while rural Gabonese typically eat all foods with the right hand or a spoon. Village-dwellers also eat most meals from a single communal bowl or platter, although guests—and sometimes fathers—have their own bowls. In some Gabonese families, men and older boys eat indoors while women and children eat outdoors or in the ***cuisine*** (kitchen area—see *Family and Kinship*).

Traditional Diet

The early inhabitants of Gabon ate a varied diet of wild foods drawn from both the land and the sea. The Mpongwe and the Séké, for example, caught and sold sardines, while the Baka Pygmies preferred fish from the deep sea. Although animal husbandry historically has not been common in Gabon, many ethnic groups once hunted large animals, including antelopes, chimpanzees, crocodiles, and gorillas. As Bantu-speaking groups arrived in Gabon, they imported with them the tradition of eating cassava or manioc, a starchy tuber that is easy to plant and cultivate.

Since wild fruit is abundant in Gabon, the country's inhabitants historically have eaten both common fruits, such as plantains and bananas, and more exotic fruits, such as ***atanga***—a small, egg-shaped fruit with a salty flavor—and ***mvut***—a round, deep red fruit with a sour center. Bantu-speaking groups eventually imported papaya and citrus fruits to add to their variety.

Modern Diet

Especially in urban areas, the modern Gabonese diet reflects extensive French influence (see *History and Myth*). Accordingly, vendors sell baguettes on many street corners, and omelets are popular. In rural parts of Gabon, traditional foods are still more common. In those areas, staple crops such as corn, rice, yams, sweet potatoes, sugarcane, and cassava (pictured) still constitute the core of the diet. In many cases, cassava and other root vegetables are made into ***fufu***, a porridge or dough that often is served with stew. As ***fufu*** is bland, ***berbere***—a spice made from chilies—is sometimes added for flavor.

Breakfast usually consists of ***fufu*** along with coffee or tea and leftovers from the previous meal. Families commonly gather in the afternoon to consume the largest meal of the day, consisting of dishes such as ***coupé-coupé*** (smoked meat on a baguette). Dinner may consist of stews or soups such as ***nyembwé***, which is made with palm oil, pine nuts, and chicken.

Fruit remains a popular snack in Gabon, especially plantains and bananas, the skin fiber of which historically were used also to make ropes and medicines. Other popular fruits and vegetables include avocadoes, tomatoes, eggplant, mangoes, papayas, coconuts, and pineapples.

Meat: Bushmeat—a catch-all term that refers to a range of wild game, including antelope, monkey, porcupine, and snake—is common in rural Gabon and is considered a delicacy in urban areas. While hunting is regulated to preserve endangered species, illegal hunting is common. Other sources of protein include chicken and seafood, especially fish and crab.

Beverages

Water is the most important beverage, although soft drinks such as Coca-Cola and alcoholic beverages also are popular. The alcoholic drink of choice for many Gabonese is Régab, a beer that is brewed in Gabon and is regarded by many as one of Africa's finest. Another local beer known as Castel also has its followers, as does palm wine.

Health Overview

Although Gabon has improved the health of its population significantly in recent years, statistical indicators suggest that basic healthcare remains inadequate. Maternal mortality, for example, has remained at 291 deaths per 100,000 live births—over 10 times the US rate—while infant mortality is among the highest in the world at 46 deaths per 100,000 live births. Urbanization has expanded access to medical facilities, although it also has led to poor sanitation and facilitated the spread of communicable diseases.

Albert Schweitzer

Albert Schweitzer was a lecturer, philosopher, and musician born in 1875 in the Alsace region of France, which was then part of Germany. At some point in his mid-30s, Schweitzer decided to become a medical missionary and enrolled at the University of Strasbourg to study medicine. In 1913, at the age of 38, he moved with his family to what is now the city of Lambaréné, Gabon, and opened a hospital.

The hospital was controversial. Schweitzer allowed families to stay with patients and prepare food in the hospital – a practice considered unsanitary. Moreover, while some hailed Schweitzer for his compassion, others accused him of racism. Despite this criticism, the hospital treated more than 150,000 patients under Schweitzer, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize posthumously in 1978.

The hospital that Schweitzer founded still serves the people of Gabon, while the US National Institutes of Health recognizes it as one of Africa's best malaria research centers. Among other services, the Albert Schweitzer Hospital offers primary care and surgery to more than 30,000 patients annually. The hospital chose an African director for the first time in 2012.

Traditional Medicine

Traditional medicine comprises knowledge, skills, and practices that are used to pursue holistic health as derived from the beliefs, theories, and experiences of indigenous populations. In Gabon, healthcare in many ethnic groups historically has been the responsibility of traditional healers. The Fang, for example, relied on healers who had an extensive knowledge of herbs and offered both physical and spiritual treatment.

According to the World Health Organization, the government of Gabon officially recognizes traditional medicine, maintaining an inventory of the traditional medications used in the country. Nevertheless, the government does not regulate, license, or offer official guidance about traditional medical practices.

Iboga: Traditional healers widely use the root *Tabernanthe iboga*, also known simply as iboga (pictured), to treat certain ailments. Patents consume the root bark by chewing it, smoking it in pipes, or crushing it into powder. Gabonese believe that iboga can cure alcoholism and other addictions without creating a dependency. In recent years, a growing number of Western tourists have visited Gabon in hopes of using iboga for this purpose. As both a hallucinogen and a stimulant, iboga has a potent effect on body and mind. Consequently, some Gabonese use iboga as part of rituals (see *Religion and Spirituality*) in which they try to communicate with deceased ancestors and learn of cures for their ailments. Despite its perceived benefits, iboga causes insomnia and can be fatal if taken in large quantities.

Modern Healthcare System

Gabon's healthcare system is one of the most highly developed in the region. Medical care is provided mostly through public facilities, and even private facilities often function as if they were public. Yet, facilities are limited outside Libreville, while many Gabonese cannot afford healthcare. In addition, many hospitals need repairs or lack reliable utilities.

Insurance: In 2007 the Gabonese government established a national health insurance plan that was among the first of its kind in Africa. The plan provides for benefits to be implemented in stages, whereby rural farmers, the unemployed, and the self-employed are the first recipients. Once the plan comes into full effect, the system will be funded through co-pays, sales taxes, and employee contributions to health plans.

Health Challenges

Malaria: About 8.2% of the population is infected with malaria, which is the leading cause of death in children under age 5. Malaria's spread is often attributed to the country's poor sewage disposal systems, which are a breeding ground for malaria-carrying mosquitos.

Tuberculosis (TB): Although Gabon's TB infection rate historically has been high, it has declined since 2004. Still, in 2013 about 450 per 100,000 Gabonese were infected with TB—nearly twice the rate for sub-Saharan Africa as a whole.

Ebola Virus: Ebola virus—a disease that typically spreads to humans when they eat or prepare infected chimpanzee meat—is a major concern in Gabon due to the continued popularity of bushmeat (see above). The disease causes hemorrhaging and fever and in many cases is fatal.

HIV/AIDS: Due to certain cultural factors (see *Sex and Gender*) and a lack of public awareness, the prevalence of HIV/AIDS has risen steadily since the 1990s. As of 2013 approximately 7.2% of Gabonese adults age 15-49 were infected with HIV—the 14th highest rate in the world and slightly higher than the average for sub-Saharan Africa. About 61% of HIV-infected people in Gabon are women age 15-29.

Gabon has worked with several non-profit groups to counter the epidemic by distributing condoms and expanding education about HIV/AIDS. In 2012 Gabonese First Lady Sylvia Bongo Ondimba launched a campaign known as "CAN without AIDS," which uses sports to teach young Gabonese about HIV/AIDS.

11. ECONOMICS AND RESOURCES

Overview

Due primarily to its vast petroleum reserves, Gabon is one of the wealthiest and most developed countries in Africa. Its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) expanded 5.10 percent in 2014 from the previous year. However, the country's wealth is distributed unequally: the richest 1/5 of the population receives about 90% of Gabon's income, while most other individuals live in poverty.

There also is a sharp economic distinction between urban and rural Gabon. Since employment is rarely available in rural areas, village dwellers on average are poorer than city dwellers. For the most part, rural inhabitants meet their basic needs through a blend of subsistence farming and contributions from family members employed in cities. Despite these conditions, village dwellers often have a higher quality of life than the urban poor, as they typically are able to provide for their own needs directly and therefore have less need for money (Photo: Port-Gentil).

Apart from inequality and poverty, Gabon's economy faces a number of challenges. For example, Gabon relies heavily upon foreign workers, as the domestic labor force is neither technically skilled in the oil industry nor large enough to meet the needs of the retail and transportation industries. In addition, the economy suffered for many years from the government's poor fiscal management. That is, in order to finance a massive civil service and large, poorly managed, state-owned firms, the government accumulated vast debts against volatile oil revenues.

Gabon's greatest economic woe is an impending decline in oil revenues. Gabon's oil production peaked in 1997, and by some estimates, the country's reserves will be depleted by 2025. This trend is problematic because the government so far has done little to prepare the country for an economic future without oil.

Industry

Industrial activities, including oil extraction, manufacturing, and mining, accounted for 55% of GDP and 18% of employment in Gabon in 2015.

Oil: The dominant industrial activity in Gabon is oil extraction, which accounted for more than 3/4 of export earnings in 2012. Since Gabon's oil production began in 1956, its market has expanded to become Africa's 9th largest oil producer. About 1/2 of Gabon's oil comes from offshore oilfields, of which the most productive are located off the coast of Port-Gentil. The most productive land-based oilfields are Gamba and Rabi Kounga, which are located in southwestern Gabon.

In contrast to some African oil-producing countries, Gabon not only extracts crude oil but also processes it into petroleum products. The country's only oil refinery is *Société Gabonaise de Raffinage* (SOGARA), sited slightly north of downtown Port-Gentil. SOGARA and the businesses that support its operations—such as metalworking facilities and a shipyard—account for the bulk of non-extractive industrial activities in Gabon.

Mining: Gabon is one of the world's largest manganese suppliers, along with a significant quantity of uranium. In addition, Gabon has deposits of gold, diamonds, iron ore, and phosphates, although large investments probably would be required to exploit those deposits commercially. Much of the country's mineral extraction occurs at Moanda, which is located about 25 mi west of Franceville in southeastern Gabon.

Manufacturing: As noted above, most manufacturing activities in Gabon are linked to SOGARA's petroleum processing, although some factories process other raw materials such as lumber, sugar, and palm oil. Other industries create finished goods such as cement, cigarettes, beer, electronics, and textiles. Historically, state-owned firms staffed with family members of government officials controlled many of Gabon's manufacturing outfits, although often unprofitably.

Agriculture

The agriculture sector, which includes farming, herding, fishing, and forestry, accounted for just 3.7% of GDP in 2015, although it employed 60% of Gabon's population. The largest component by far of the agricultural sector is forestry. The forests of Gabon contain around 400 tree species of which about 100 have industrial applications. Gabon is best known for producing such hardwoods as mahogany, ebony, and ***okoumé*** (native to equatorial West Africa and is Gabon's primary timber species).

The rest of the agriculture sector is small. Since thick forests cover most of Gabon, less than 1.9% of the country's territory is under permanent cultivation. The most popular staple crops are cassava, plantains, and yams, while the most important cash crops are coffee, cocoa, palm trees, sugarcane, and rubber. Large-scale livestock herding is uncommon, although Gabonese raise small numbers of pigs, goats, sheep, and chickens. Despite its long coastline, Gabon's fishing industry is small and relies on traditional methods for 2/3 of its catch.

Services

The services sector, which consists mainly of government jobs and retail trade, accounted for about 42% of GDP and 25% of employment in 2012. The government is the largest employer in Gabon, typically paying higher-than-average salaries. While expatriates from Asia and the Middle East manage many of the country's mid-size retail outlets, immigrants from countries in West Africa often operate small market stalls.

Tourism: Due to its densely forested geography and lack of infrastructure, Gabon hosts relatively few tourists despite its many attractions. The most notable ones include the beaches of the Atlantic Coast, the scenic Ogooué River, the Crystal Mountains, and about 80% of the chimpanzees and gorillas in Africa. The tourism industry nevertheless may be poised to grow as a result of the elder President Bongo's decision in 2002 to convert 10% of the country's territory into wildlife preserves.

Currency

Gabon's official currency is the Central African CFA Franc, which consists of 100 ***centimes***. It is issued in 5 banknotes (500, 1,000, 2,000, 5,000, 10,000 CFA) and 8 coins (1, 2, 5, 10, 25, 50, 100, 500 CFA) (Photo: Part of a CFA note from 1978). Since the value of the CFA Franc is fixed to that of the Euro at €1=656 CFA, $1 equals about 596.3 CFA.

Foreign Trade

Gabon's exports, which totaled $12.2 billion in 2015, consisted mostly of oil, timber, manganese, and uranium sold to the US (44%), Australia (8%), Malaysia (8%), Japan (9%), China (7%), and Spain (5%). Imports, which amounted to slightly less than $4 billion in 2015, consisted mainly of machinery, equipment, food, and building materials sourced from France (38%), China (12%), the US (5%), Belgium (4%), and Cameroon (4%).

China: Since the early 2000s, Chinese firms and the Chinese government have expanded their presence in Gabon. Chinese firms (many of which are owned by their government) have undertaken ventures in such industries as construction, mining, petroleum, and timber, while the Chinese government has initiated a wide range development projects. Due to this increased involvement, Chinese often have a more visible presence in Gabon than Europeans, especially in rural areas.

Foreign Aid

In 2015 Gabon received over $80 million of official development assistance (ODA) from single-country donors. The most generous by far was France, which contributed nearly 4/5 (80%) of the total. Other significant donors included Japan (8% of the total), Germany (5%), the US (3%), Canada (3%), and Korea (3%). In the same year, ODA from multilateral organizations, of which almost all (62%) came from the European Union and related agencies. The remainder came largely from the United Nations and the African Development Bank.

12. TECHNOLOGY AND MATERIAL

Overview

Gabon relies on infrastructure, such as airports and airplanes, and technologies, such as mobile phones, to help citizens bypass the challenges presented by the country's forested and mountainous geography and unusually rainy climate.

Transportation

Private forms of transportation, such as cars, motorcycles, and bicycles, are rare in Gabon. Similarly, there is limited public transit. Consequently, most Gabonese make short journeys on foot. For longer journeys, various types of taxis are the most popular choice. For traveling around town, standard taxis are the most popular, although prices have risen in recent years. For intercity travel, bush taxis, or ***taxis brousse***, are most common. Most ***taxis brousse*** are minibuses, 4WDs, or cars that tend to be ramshackle and overly crowded.

In heavily watered parts of Gabon, ***pirogues***—dug-out wooden canoes—historically have been one of the most common transport means. Although traditionally propelled by a ***pagaye***, or pole, many modern ***pirogues*** are powered by gas engines. Gabonese also sometimes travel by ferry. For example, one route on the Ogooué River links Port-Gentil and Lambaréné.

Roadways: Gabon has 6,700 mi of roadways, of which only about 580 mi (8.7%) are paved. Most roads outside main cities are unpaved, which frequently become impassable during the rainy seasons. Notably, Port-Gentil—the country's 2nd largest city—is not integrated into Gabon's road network at all and must rely on air and sea links. Although car ownership remains relatively low in Gabon, it has expanded more rapidly than the road network in recent years. Consequently, traffic jams are common in the morning and late afternoon, especially in Libreville.

Railways: Gabon has 403 mi of railways, all of which form part of the *Transgabonais* (Trans-Gabon Railway). Financed by oil revenues and built by the state between 1974 and 1986, the *Transgabonais* carries both passengers and freight between Libreville in the Northwest and Franceville in the Southeast. Although delays are fairly common, the *Transgabonais* plays an important role in linking the capital with rural areas. Since the line was privatized in 1999, many people have proposed its extension to Brazzaville, Republic of the Congo.

Airways: Gabon relies upon airways as a primary mode of transport. The country has 45 airports and airstrips, of which 14 have paved runways. The primary transit hub is Libreville Leon M'ba International Airport. There also are international airports at Franceville and Port-Gentil.
In addition to the national airline, Air Gabon, the country is served by various privately run carriers.

Waterways and Ports: Although Gabon has extensive inland waterways, only about 1,000 mi of them are navigable due to the presence of falls and rapids. The country's largest river, the Ogooué, accounts for about 1/5 (190 mi) of Gabon's navigable waterways, which mostly are limited to the 100 mi of each river that are nearest to the Atlantic Ocean. Gabon has 3 main ports. Port-Gentil is the primary port for mining equipment imports and oil exports. Owendo, opened in 1974 just south of Libreville, mainly handles timber exports. Mayumba, a small port located along the southwestern coast of Gabon, also handles timber exports.

Energy

Gabon derives most of its energy from oil and biomass (organic material such as wood), although hydropower from river dams accounts for about 9% of the country's energy mix. Only 36% of Gabonese have access to electricity, which is limited mostly to urban areas. With China's help, Gabon is working to double its electrical transmission lines, although those plans mostly concern installations in the vicinity of Libreville.

Media

While Gabon's constitution guarantees freedom of speech and press, the government sometimes violates those rights. Instead of imposing obvious press restrictions, the government reportedly uses strict libel laws and licensing requirements to bully reporters into censoring themselves. As the alternative is typically legal action and financial ruin, many reporters comply.

Print Media: Gabon's only daily newspaper is *L'Union*, a state-owned publication. There also are about 10 private newspapers—mostly political in nature—that typically appear weekly or monthly. Despite government censorship, there are several opposition papers, including *Le Nganga*, a satirical newspaper, and *Misamu*, a weekly newspaper that expresses independent political views.

Radio and TV: A government-owned broadcaster known as *Radio-Télévision Gabonaise* (RTVG) operates two national TV stations, which broadcast in French, as well as two national radio stations—RTG 1, which also broadcasts in French, and RTG 2, which is a network of stations that broadcast in French and indigenous languages (see *Language and Communication*). In addition to these public channels, there are private stations, including TéléAfrica on TV and Africa No. 1 on the radio.

Telecommunications

Gabon's telecommunications systems generally are adequate, although more people have access in recent years due to the growth of mobile telephony. While in 2000 fewer than 10% of Gabonese had mobile phones, there were more mobile phone subscriptions than people by 2011. Approximately 8% of the population used the Internet in 2011, up from just over 1% in 2000. Internet cafés are widely available in Libreville, Franceville, and Port-Gentil, and even in smaller cities such as Lastoursville. Both middle-class and elite Gabonese commonly use social media websites like Facebook, and online discussions about Gabonese politics are common.

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