

 AFCLC

EXPEDITIONARY CULTURE  
**FIELD GUIDE**

**Burkina Faso**



# 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 two parts:



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

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



For further information, visit the Air Force Culture and Language Center (AFCLC) website at [www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/](http://www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/) or contact AFCLC’s Region Team at [AFCLC.Region@us.af.mil](mailto:AFCLC.Region@us.af.mil).

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# PART 1 – CULTURE GENERAL

## What is Culture?

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



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

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

## Force Multiplier

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

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

economic institutions that reflect their cultural beliefs and traditions.

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

### **Cultural Domains**

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

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

### **Social Behaviors Across Cultures**

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



Conversely, industrialized nations have more sophisticated market economies, producing foodstuffs for

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

### Worldview

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



As depicted in the chart below, we can apply the 12 cultural domains to help us compare similarities and differences across cultures. We evaluate others' behavior to determine if they are "people like me" or

"people not like me." Consequently, we assume that individuals falling into the "like me" category share our perspectives and values.

## 12 Domains of Culture



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.

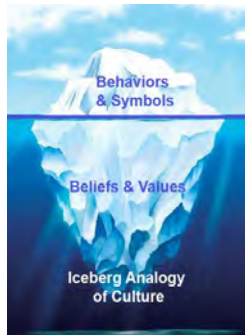
### **Cultural Belief System**

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.

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

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



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



did not end the European presence on the African continent nor did it drastically alter their attitudes towards Africans.

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

## 2. Political and Social Relations

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

Traditional African political organizations in the form of bands, tribes, and chiefdoms have existed for several



millennia and continue to influence contemporary African governments. Uncommon in modern society, bands are limited to hunting and gathering economies, such as the !Kung of the southern African Kalahari Desert and foragers of central African forests.

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

### 3. Religion and Spirituality

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

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



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

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

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 single 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

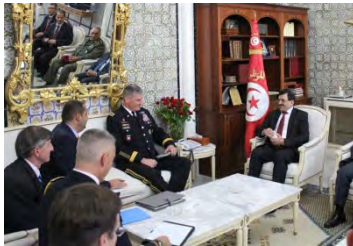


defined as the cultural practice of sharing meaning in interaction, both verbally and non-verbally. America is predominantly a monolingual society, where traditionally, fluency in a second language has been considered a luxury rather than a necessity. Conversely, national survival for many societies 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 2023 statistics, about 100 million African children and youth were out of school, of which 35 million were of primary school age.

## 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 18% of the global population, Africa is a victim of many of the world's debilitating health disorders. According to the World Health Organization, 68% of the global HIV/AIDS cases and 95% 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 65% of the Sub-Saharan African population having access to basic drinking water, water-borne bacterial diseases such as cholera and schistosomiasis are common.



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

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

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

## 11. Economics and Resources

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



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

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

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

## 12. Technology and Material

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

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



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

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

## PART 2 – CULTURE SPECIFIC

### 1. HISTORY AND MYTH

#### History Overview

Before the arrival of French colonists in the late 19th century, kingdoms allied to the Mossi ethnic group ruled most of Burkina Faso. The early-mid 20th-century colonial period was marked by French control, forced labor, and a destabilized economy. Following independence in 1960, the country has experienced long periods of autocratic rule punctuated by coups d'état.

**Note:** Although Burkina Faso did not assume its present name until 1984, the authors use the term “Burkina Faso” throughout this guide to refer to the country’s present-day territory.

#### Early Burkina Faso

Due to a dearth of archaeological artifacts and written records, little is known about the country’s early history. Some scholars believe that the area’s first inhabitants were hunter-gatherers who arrived in the northwestern part of the country no later than 7,000 years ago. Farming settlements probably arose between 3600 and 2600 BC, while iron tools and ceramic artifacts likely appeared between 1500 and 1000 BC.

#### The Loropéni Ruins

Located about 200 mi southwest of Ouagadougou (the capital of Burkina Faso), the Loropéni Ruins constitute the remains of an 11th-century stone fortress. Some historians speculate that the Kulango or Lohron peoples (which today live in Côte d’Ivoire) built the fortress to house workers and protect gold stocks, which at the time were traded on lucrative desert trade routes. In 2009 the United Nations declared Loropéni a UNESCO World Heritage site, thereby asserting that the ruins are “of outstanding value to humanity.”

## Early Political Structures

In 1100 AD, a variety of political structures began to emerge in Burkina Faso, the earliest of which developed in the West and South. In those areas, members of such ethnic groups as the Bobo, Gurunsi, and Lobi merged into decentralized farming communities. In the North, nomadic pastoralists (cattle herders) of the Peulh and Tuareg ethnic groups traversed Burkina Faso for centuries before eventually forming small Islamic states in the 19th century. In the East and Center, the Mossi and Gurma ethnicities founded several kingdoms, some of which rose to prominence in the 15th century AD (see p9-10 of *Political and Social Relations* for details on Burkina Faso's ethnic groups).

## The Mossi Kingdoms

The most influential of these early polities were the Mossi kingdoms, which were founded after warriors from Ghana invaded Burkina Faso in the 1400s. Of the many Mossi kingdoms that eventually emerged, the largest and most powerful



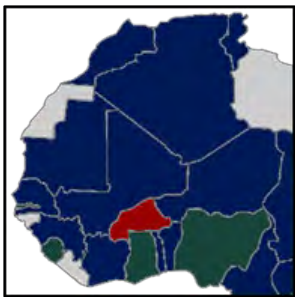
were Ouagadougou, Tenkodogo, and Yatenga. The Mossi kingdoms were highly organized and hierarchical. Consequently, they were able to remain unified and powerful for around 500 years, despite assimilating people from many different ethnic groups and fighting wars against powerful neighboring empires.

Most inhabitants of the Mossi kingdoms cultivated staple crops, such as millet and sorghum. Since the kingdoms sat on trade routes linking the Gulf of Guinea and the Sahara Desert, many people were also traders. In exchange for such goods as salt and weapons, Mossi traders exported grains, donkeys, bronze, copper, and gold. While some Mossi owned and traded slaves, others—mainly in the Southwest—were enslaved themselves.

Despite centuries of internal stability and external security, the Mossi kingdoms began to buckle under pressure from outside forces during the 19th century. At the same time, Mossi politics descended into rivalry and civil war. These dual forces left the Mossi vulnerable as the first Europeans arrived in West Africa.

## Arrival of Europeans

The first European to arrive in Burkina Faso was Gottlob Adolf Krause, a German explorer who reached Ouagadougou in 1886. Krause was followed 2 years later by Louis Gustave Binger, a French explorer and military officer who remained in Ouagadougou for several weeks. During his visit, Binger met with the **Moro Naba** (King of Ouagadougou) and invited him to accept French protection. The **Moro Naba** declined Binger's invitation and warned the French not to intervene in the region.



This warning did not dissuade the French from attempting to extend their influence into Burkina Faso. They wanted to control the region because it was located directly in the middle of what would become French West Africa and

therefore had substantial geostrategic value. Binger also observed that Burkina Faso would make a good source of labor for other French colonies in West Africa.

## Colonization

In February 1895, the French Minister of Colonies ordered that protectorates—a type of colonial political structure—be created throughout much of Burkina Faso. Although Yatenga, a major Mossi kingdom, peacefully agreed to become a protectorate in May of that year, the French found it harder to convince other polities in Burkina Faso. Consequently, in May 1896 the French sent a 500-man force under the command of Lieutenant Paul Voulet to take Burkina Faso by force.

A key motive for the timing of Voulet's expedition was to block British attempts to expand northward from Ghana (then called the Gold Coast Colony). Using such brutal tactics as destroying farms and villages, Voulet's force defeated the Bobo, Gurma, Lobi, and Mossi by the end of 1897. In the following year, the French and British formally settled their claims in the region, marking the unofficial start of the colonial era in Burkina Faso.



## The Colonial Era

Although the French nominally controlled all of Burkina Faso by the end of the 19th century, they spent several more years quelling pockets of resistance. By 1904, the colonial power felt secure enough in its control to



incorporate the territory into Upper Senegal and Niger, a short-lived colony that also included parts of Mali. Just 15 years later, the French converted Burkina Faso into a separate colony known as Upper Volta.

In establishing Upper Volta's administrative system, the French left traditional Mossi political structures in place. However, they replaced many Mossi leaders with more pliable members of the same ethnic group and ultimately placed most power in the hands of French officials. The main duties of local authorities were to collect taxes and recruit labor. Some Mossi leaders became infamous for corruption and power abuse.

**Forced Labor:** For all but the last few years of the colonial era, the French forced Voltaics (residents of Upper Volta) to work in a variety of roles. Some Voltaics worked on cotton plantations in Upper Volta, while others worked on cocoa, coffee, or sugar plantations in Côte d'Ivoire or on infrastructure projects in other parts of French West Africa. The French also conscripted many Voltaics to fight on their behalf in both World Wars.

These policies caused many Voltaics to flee to the Gold Coast Colony, a neighboring British territory to the south that became Ghana in 1957. For those who stayed, the policies had a range of negative effects. For example, France's conscription policies led to a revolt in the Northwest in 1915. Meanwhile, France's large-scale agricultural schemes disrupted Voltaics' traditional subsistence patterns and left the colony vulnerable to famines, which occurred in 1926 and 1930.

By 1932, Upper Volta was drought-stricken, impoverished, and nearing collapse. Consequently, the French divided the colony between neighboring French possessions. This change deeply upset the Mossi rulers, who had submitted reluctantly to French rule mostly to preserve the territorial integrity of their lands.

## Nationalism and Independence

Motivated by international trends toward self-determination and decolonization, France gave its colonies representation in the French Parliament in 1946. Côte d'Ivoire, which had absorbed most of the former Upper Volta colony, sent 3 representatives: 2 Voltaics and Felix Houphouet-Boigny, a charismatic and popular Ivoirian. All 3 men belonged to the African Democratic Rally (RDA), a group that sought to end French rule.

In an effort to limit the subversive appeal of Houphouet-Boigny and his RDA party, the French reconstituted Upper Volta as an Overseas Territory in 1947. This status afforded Upper Volta new forms of political autonomy, such as a territorial assembly. Still, the RDA remained popular in the Southwest. At the same time, a conservative, Mossi-affiliated party known as the Voltaic Union (UV) gained support in the North.



Upper Volta received greater autonomy in 1958, when the colony's inhabitants approved a referendum to become an autonomous republic within the French Community, an association of republics that succeeded the French Empire. In the same year, a Mossi named Maurice

Yameogo became President of Upper Volta's Council of Ministers. He opposed immediate independence on the grounds that Upper Volta could not sustain itself economically. By 1960, however, France had decided to end its presence in West Africa. Consequently, the Republic of Upper Volta attained independence from France on August 5, 1960, and Yameogo became the country's first President.

## The Republic of Upper Volta

Yameogo quickly assumed nearly dictatorial control over Upper Volta, banning all political parties but his own. Meanwhile, his prediction about the young country's economic instability proved accurate, although Yameogo's adopting austere measures to repair the economy led to civil unrest. On January 3, 1966, Yameogo resigned in the face of military pressure and was replaced by Colonel Sangoule Lamizana.

After disbanding the National Assembly and suspending the constitution, Lamizana formed a temporary ruling council. By the end of 1970, the council had secured the adoption of a new constitution and overseen West Africa's first multiparty elections, nominally returning the country to civilian rule. Nevertheless, Upper Volta's continuing economic problems led Lamizana to reassert military rule in 1974 and, after the adoption of yet another new constitution in 1977, to run for President in 1978. Although he was elected, Lamizana soon faced widespread strikes by civil servants, teachers, and laborers. This unrest prompted Colonel Saye Zerbo to oust Lamizana on November 25, 1980.

Zerbo's rule was short-lived. His authoritarian policies, such as outlawing strikes and forcing bars to close during the workday, inspired anger among Upper Volta's population. Consequently, few were surprised when Jean-Baptiste Ouédraogo, a medical doctor and military officer, overthrew Zerbo in yet another coup d'état on November 7, 1982.

After taking power, Ouédraogo pledged a swift return to civilian rule and appointed Thomas Sankara, a popular military officer, to serve as Prime Minister. The new government soon split into 2 factions, with Ouédraogo and Sankara on opposite sides. After Ouédraogo had Sankara arrested on contrived charges, Sankara's backers—who notably included Blaise Compaoré, an Army officer who would succeed Sankara as President—moved on the capital and ousted Ouédraogo on August 4, 1983. Sankara was named the new President.



### The Sankara Era

Viewing himself as a revolutionary, Sankara set out to remake Upper Volta by reforming social policy, promoting self-reliance, and eliminating government waste and corruption. He began by changing the country's name to "Burkina Faso" by mixing words from two indigenous languages (see p3 of *Language and Communication*) and means "the land of the honorable [ones]." Sankara also gave the country a new flag, motto, and anthem—the last of which the President himself composed.

Sankara promoted reforms on many issues. On the economy, he created job training centers for the homeless and distributed more resources to rural areas. On foreign policy, he shunned the West and urged African leaders to renounce their debts to rich countries. He tackled government corruption and waste by introducing rules enforcing civil servants to live more modestly. Sankara also banned prostitution and female genital mutilation (see p3 of *Sex and Gender*) and made vaccines available to millions of children (see p3-4 of *Sustenance and Health*).

In contrast to the progressive nature of his reforms, Sankara's tactics were often authoritarian. For example, he shut down a popular newspaper and jailed or executed a number of political opponents. In addition, he continued to defend the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDRs)—organizations that implemented reforms at the local level—even after many CDRs had abused their power. As his decisions became increasingly arbitrary, Sankara lost the support of his advisors. On October



15, 1987, Sankara died in a gun battle with soldiers who many suspect were working for Sankara's old ally Blaise Compaoré.

### **The Compaoré Era**

Following Sankara's death, Compaoré denied responsibility but still succeeded his late friend. After four years of military rule, Burkina Faso adopted a new constitution and held elections in 1991.

Compaoré won unopposed due to a boycott. He was reelected in 1998, 2005, and 2010 but not without further boycotts and political tricks that helped him circumvent term limits.

In the 1990s, Compaoré repealed many of Sankara's reforms. For example, he introduced free market reforms and welcomed Western aid. Compaoré also pursued better ties with France and other African countries. However, he endured criticism for his ties with Charles Taylor, a war criminal and former Liberian President. In addition, Compaoré came under fire for Burkina Faso's role in transporting conflict diamonds from Sierra Leone. Also known as "blood diamonds," conflict diamonds are mined in war zones and sold to help finance combat operations.

In 1998, Compaoré came under fire for the suspicious death of reporter Norbert Zongo, who had been investigating a murder case in which Compaoré's bodyguards were suspects. Student protests of police brutality and an Army mutiny over unpaid housing allowances occurred in 2011. After a 27-year rule, Compaoré stepped down in October 2014 following protests against his attempt to remove term limits from the Constitution. Roch Marc Kaboré was elected in both 2015 and 2020 before being ousted in a coup.

In September 2022, a military junta led by Ibrahim Traore ousted transitional President Lt Col Paul-Henri Damiba.

### The Mythical Origins of the Mossi

The story of how the Mossi kingdoms were founded involves a blend of history, which is considered a record of verifiable facts, and myth, which may not be verifiable but still reflects cultural values and self-perceptions. Consequently, although the verifiable history of the Mossi kingdoms does not exceed 600 or so years, Mossi oral tradition can illuminate what may have occurred even earlier.

According to that oral tradition, the Mossi people are descended from Nédéga, a King who ruled lands in northern Ghana around the 1200s AD. Nédéga had 8 sons and one daughter, Yennega, who fought and rode horses better than all her brothers. Nédéga was very fond of Yennega and refused to allow her to marry. Consequently, Yennega fled to the forest, where she married an elephant hunter named Rialle and had a son named Ouédraogo.

When he came of age, Ouédraogo set off to conquer his own empire in Burkina Faso with the help of his grandfather's cavalry. He then had 3 sons, one of which is supposed to have given birth to Oubri, the founder of Ouagadougou and first **Moro Naba** (King of Ouagadougou). Since most historians agree that Oubri existed, he represents the point at which the story of the Mossi transitions from myth to history.

## 2. POLITICAL AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

### Official Name

Burkina Faso

### Political Borders

Mali: 621 mi

Niger: 390 mi

Benin: 190 mi

Togo: 78 mi

Ghana: 341 mi

Côte d'Ivoire: 363 mi

### Capital

Ouagadougou

### Demographics

Burkina Faso is one of the world's fastest growing countries, with a population of 23.04 million increasing at a rate of 2.4% per year—the 22nd highest rate in the world. Burkina Faso is also among the world's youngest countries, with approximately 63% of its population under age 25. These trends are driven in part by the country's high fertility rate, which at 4.02 children per woman is the 23rd highest in the world.

Burkina Faso has a population density of 218 people per sq mi, which is roughly comparable to Uzbekistan and Tunisia. Burkina Faso's population is unevenly distributed, with the largest concentration in the center of the country.



### Flag

Burkina Faso's flag consists of two horizontal stripes of equal size and proportion with a star in the middle. The red stripe on the upper half of the flag stands for Burkina Faso's struggle for independence (see p4-5 of

*History and Myth*), while the green stripe on the lower half symbolizes hope and abundance. The yellow star signifies the country's mineral wealth (see p3 of *Economics and Resources*).

## Geography and Climate

Burkina Faso is located in central West Africa and has a total area of 105,869 sq mi, or about the same size as Colorado. It borders Mali to the west and north, Niger to the east, Benin and Togo to the southeast, Ghana to the south, and Côte d'Ivoire to the southwest.



Burkina Faso divides into 3 climatic and geographic zones. The northern 1/4 of the country's territory constitutes the Sahelian zone, which consists of desert and semi-desert and receives as few as 6 inches of annual rainfall. The middle 1/2 of the country makes up the Sudano-Sahelian zone, which is dominated by a large central plateau that rises 650-1,000 feet above sea level. This zone consists of savanna and shrubs and receives about 25-40 inches of rain per year. The southwestern corner of the country constitutes the Sudano-Guinean zone, which receives as many as 51 inches of annual rainfall and consists of forests.

There are three distinct seasons in Burkina Faso. The mild season lasts from October through February and is characterized by relatively cool temperatures, not exceeding 95°F and dropping as low as 40°F at night in the desert. By January the mild season also brings dry, dusty **Harmattan** trade winds. The hot season lasts from March through May and is known for its high temperatures, which often top 100°F and can exceed 115°F in the North. The rainy season starts in May and lasts through September. Some regions receive more rain than others in the rainy season, although no region experiences constant rain. Rainy season humidity is high, ranging from 70-95%.

Burkina Faso is mostly dry and landlocked, having eight lakes and three river basins—Komoé, Niger, and Volta. With an area of 45,000 sq mi, the Volta Basin is by far the largest and source for the country's original name, Upper Volta. It includes three main rivers—the Mouhoun (Black Volta), Nakambe (White

Volta), and Nazinon (Red Volta)—which converge in Ghana to form the Volta River and eventually man-made Lake Volta.

### Environmental Issues and Natural Hazards

Burkina Faso has a number of environmental issues, the most serious of which are drought, deforestation, and soil depletion. These issues are interconnected and stem from overgrazing, overpopulation relative to water supplies, overuse of wood fuel (see p2 of *Technology and Material*), and climate change. Due to its environmental issues, Burkina Faso also faces related hazards, including famines and flash floods.

### Government

Burkina Faso is a republic that gained its independence from France in 1960. After undergoing a series of coups d'état in its first three decades of independence (see p5-7 of *History and Myth*), the country adopted its current constitution in 1991. Burkina Faso is divided administratively into 13 **régions**, which divide further into 300 **départements** and 7,285 villages.

### Executive Branch

Ibrahim Traoré serves as President following the ousting of Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba. In October 2022, Traoré's junta organized a 2-day forum in which Traoré was designated as the transitional President and the transitional governing charter was adopted. The charter stipulates that the government



would be led by a Prime Minister, currently Apollinaire Joachim Kyélem de Tambèla and a cabinet of no more than 25 ministers (currently 23).

### Legislative Branch

The transitional governing charter also stipulated a 71-member legislature which was tasked with drafting electoral laws and other guidelines during the transitional period. This was to be composed of

21 members selected by Traoré, 16 members from the security and defense forces, 13 members not affiliated with a political movement, 12 members from political parties, and 10 members from civil society.



## Judicial Branch

Burkina Faso's legal system is based on French civil law and the customary laws of local communities. The country's highest courts are the Supreme Court of Appeals, which deals with civil and criminal cases; the Council of State, which handles issues of administration; and the Court of Accounts, which oversees public finances. There are various lower courts located around the country. Burkina Faso also has a 9-member Constitutional Council that determines the constitutionality of laws. Since the President appoints judges to the upper levels of the judiciary, it is not entirely separate from the Executive Branch. Traditional courts operate at the village level and usually handle issues of family law, such as divorce and inheritance.

## Political Climate

Despite its early history of military takeovers, Burkina Faso had been one of the most stable countries in West Africa since the accession of President Compaoré (see p7-8 of *History and Myth*). Under his stewardship, the country's economy has grown relatively rapidly (see p4 of *Economics and Resources*). Since the end of the 1990s, however, Compaoré increasingly faced demonstrations from various Burkinabè (this term is both an adjective for things pertaining to Burkina Faso and the singular and plural noun for residents of Burkina Faso) groups, including students, soldiers, and laborers (see p8 of *History and Myth*).



In the 2015 general election, Roch Marc Christian Kaboré of the People's Movement for Progress won 53% of the vote, replacing Compaoré as President. Kaboré's presidency was also tumultuous and, although he won reelection in 2020, he was ousted by Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba, leader of Patriotic Movement for Safeguard and Restoration (MPSR), during the January 2022 coup. In September 2022, the second military coup, led by Captain Ibrahim Traoré took place. Traoré cited Damiba's inability to quell the Islamist insurgency as reason for the coup.



## Defense

The Burkina Faso Armed Forces consist of an Army, Air Force, and Gendarmerie with a collective strength of 20,800 personnel. Burkina Faso's security forces also include the Security Company, a paramilitary force of 250, and the People's Militia, a reserve force of 45,000. Having neither a coastline nor navigable inland waterways, Burkina Faso does not have a Navy.

In 2023, Burkina Faso spent approximately \$832 million—or 4.66% of gross domestic product (GDP)—on defense, a level slightly higher than the sub-Saharan African average that year of 1.02% of GDP. Due to its strong ties with the French military, the Burkinabè military sometimes receives surplus supplies of basic equipment. The French military also helps the Burkinabè military maintain its equipment, while the US military provides training to Burkinabè military personnel.

**Army:** Consisting of 16,000 personnel, the Burkina Faso Land Army (*L'Armée de Terre* or LAT) is responsible for defending Burkina Faso, assisting civilian security forces, participating in peacekeeping missions, and aiding the country's social and economic development. Although LAT historically has been a well-motivated and disciplined force by West African standards, the 2011 mutiny (see p8 of *History and Myth*) brought that reputation into question. With just a single armored battalion and 6 ageing tanks, LAT is poorly equipped. The force relies mostly on light armored vehicles of French and US origin.

**Air Force:** Consisting of only 600 personnel, the Burkina Faso Air Force (*Force Aérienne de Burkina Faso* or FABF) generally lacks meaningful combat capabilities. Focusing mainly on border security, the FABF operates a small fleet mostly composed of Soviet/Russian-made helicopters and US-made transport craft. It also reportedly acquired 2 Mi-171Sh in 2017 and 1 C295 in 2019.

**Gendarmerie:** Sometimes labeled a paramilitary force, Burkina Faso's 4,200-strong Gendarmerie is a military-style police force that falls under the Ministry of Defense. It operates primarily in rural areas, especially near Burkina Faso's external borders.

## Burkina Faso Force Rank Insignia



General



Corps  
General



Division  
General



Brigadier  
General



Colonel  
Major



Colonel



Lieutenant  
Colonel



Commandant



Captain



Lieutenant



Sub  
Lieutenant



Chief  
Warrant  
Officer  
Major



Chief  
Warrant  
Officer



Warrant  
Officer



Chief  
Sergeant



Sergeant



Corporal



Private  
First  
Class

## Security Issues

**Civil Unrest:** Since 2015, Burkina Faso has experienced an escalation of violence attributed to rebel fighters allied with militant Islamic extremists, killing thousands and displacing nearly 2 million. In 2022, the country experienced two coups, both due in part to the former leader's inability to successfully deal with a worsening armed uprising in the country. In September, Traoré ousted Damiba and announced the dissolution of the transitional government and suspension of the current constitution. In September 2023, a coup attempt against Traoré's transitional government was thwarted.

**Crime:** Acts of petty theft, including wallet-picking and purse-snatching, are the most commonly reported crimes. In addition, there have been incidents of robbery, sexual assault, and other crimes against foreign nationals. Busy parts of Ouagadougou—such as Avenue Kwame Nkrumah, the Central Market, and UN Circle—typically have the highest crime rates.

Nevertheless, rural areas present risks of their own, especially in sparsely populated areas near Burkina Faso's northern and eastern frontiers. In those areas, armed bandits commonly stop vehicles and rob passengers, especially at night. Some bandits use land mines to disable vehicles.

**Terrorism:** A number of terrorist groups, such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA), operate in neighboring Niger and Mali. Both groups have committed kidnappings throughout the region

in order to extract ransoms and other concessions from local governments. In many cases, kidnappers target Westerners—including tourists, diplomats, and employees of non-governmental organizations (NGOs)—because they typically provide better leverage for negotiations. Since the January 2022 coup, the number of people killed by militant Islamist violence has increased significantly with an estimated 8,600 casualties in 2023 – a 137% increase from the previous year's 3,627 fatalities.



**Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP):** The Trans-Sahara region historically has served as a haven for illicit trade and more recently has become a theater of operations for AQIM and other extremist groups. Consequently, the US State Department inaugurated the TSCTP with Operation Flintlock in 2006. Operation Flintlock is now an annual exercise in which US and other Western special operations forces train African counterparts on security and stability practices. Burkina Faso joined the TSCTP in late 2008.



### Foreign Relations

Until the past few years, Burkina Faso occupied a complex place in international relations: while Western governments praised the country for its stability and sound economic management, they simultaneously reproached former President Compaoré for his ties to Libya and various groups under sanction. In recent years, Burkina Faso has distanced itself from problematic allies and played an active role in mediating conflicts elsewhere in Africa, including in neighboring Togo in 2006. However, military and economic relations between Burkina Faso and France, as well as the US, have deteriorated following the two 2022 coups.

Burkina Faso's foremost regional relationship is with Côte d'Ivoire, a neighboring country with which Burkina Faso shares economic and cultural ties. Relations were tense for many years due partly to Côte d'Ivoire's alleged mistreatment of migrant Burkinabè laborers. Ties have strengthened since Alassane Ouattara prevailed over Laurent Gbagbo in the crisis that followed Côte d'Ivoire's presidential election of 2010.

Burkina Faso's relations with neighboring Mali and Benin have suffered similar tensions due to border disputes. While Burkina Faso is now on more cordial terms with Benin, ties with Mali are in flux due to its recent political instability. As with the West, Burkina Faso's ties with Nigeria and Ghana were hindered by Compaoré's problematic alliances (see p7-8 of *History and Myth*) but have warmed with both in recent years.

## Ethnic Groups

Burkina Faso is home to more than 60 ethnic groups, many of which are closely related and therefore classified in terms of 10 larger groups. The Mossi are the largest ethnic group by far, accounting for about half the population. Another 9 groups each constitute between 2-10% of the population, although estimates of their precise sizes vary considerably.

Although each ethnic group has a traditional homeland, migration is common enough that members of most ethnic groups can be found throughout most of Burkina Faso. Since Burkinabè of different ethnic groups usually get along well, ethnic dispersion does not cause many problems. Ethnic conflict is rare and interethnic marriages common.

This spirit of ethnic cohesion is perhaps best embodied by *plaisanterie*, or interethnic teasing (see p4 of *Language and Communication*). When Burkinabè of different ethnic groups meet—whether they are



friends or strangers—they sometimes exchange negative or rude remarks about each other's ethnic affiliations. These gestures usually are extended and received in good humor with no offense.

**Mossi:** The Mossi live predominantly on the central plateau, which is also known as the Mossi Plateau. While many Mossi are Muslims, few are especially devout. Moreover, many Mossi Muslims also follow indigenous religious practices (see p7-8 of *Religion and Spirituality*). Historically an agricultural people, the Mossi are known for having a conservative, hierarchical social structure. The **Moro Naba** (highest Mossi king—see p3 of *History and Myth*) plays an important informal role in Burkina Faso's political scene, and many Burkinabè believe that the President confers with him regularly. There also are several lesser **nabas** who oversee regions or functional portfolios.

**Peulh:** The Peulh probably constitute Burkina Faso's second largest ethnic group. They live predominantly in the North and historically have subsisted as nomadic pastoralists (animal herders). Although they remain pastoral today, they now live a more sedentary lifestyle. The Peulh converted to Islam earlier than other Burkinabè ethnic groups, and today most Peulh still are Muslims (see p6-7 of *Religion and Spirituality*).



**Other African Groups:** Apart from the Mossi and Peulh, several other Burkinabè ethnic groups constitute a sizeable share of Burkina Faso's population. Many of those ethnic groups—including the Bobo, Lobi, and Senufo—inhabit the West and Southwest. Other ethnic groups like

the Gurma, or Gourmantché, live in the East, while the nomadic, pastoral Tuareg live alongside the Peulh in the North. With the exception of the Tuareg and Peulh, most Burkinabè are agriculturalists.

**Non-African Groups:** Burkina Faso is home to approximately 1,500 people of Lebanese and Syrian descent who are predominantly Burkinabè entrepreneurs. Burkina Faso also is home to a small community of French-speaking Europeans.

## Social Relations

Social relations in Burkina Faso are shaped both by personal qualities and several different hierarchies, both of which play a role in determining the level of respect among Burkinabè. Hierarchies often govern other aspects of social relations, such as the propriety of matrimonial arrangements or the distribution of local political power.

## Personal Qualities

Like members of most societies, Burkinabè value such personal qualities as honesty, loyalty, discretion, and humility. They also value communalism and have little tolerance for individualist attitudes. Burkinabè consider group consensus important and sometimes passively resist people who try to impose their will on a group without seeking other opinions.

The most admired personal qualities by far are age, wisdom, and experience. Burkinabè even have a proverb (based on a Malian author's aphorism) that likens an elder dying to a library burning to the ground. Burkinabè revere elders for the wisdom they have developed through their many experiences, treating even people just a few years older with great respect. Young people typically are expected to comply with elders' requests.

### Traditional Hierarchy

Many of Burkina Faso's ethnic groups traditionally had systems that divided society into various classes and castes. The Mossi, for example, recognized a distinction between **nakomse**, the ruling class; **talse**, the commoners; **yemse**, the slaves; and such trade-based castes as blacksmiths and **griots** (minstrels). Worldly wealth mattered little in this system, as even **nakomse** of modest means had substantial political power. Some castes were subject to restrictions. For example, neither blacksmiths nor **griots** were allowed to intermarry with other castes.

### Modern Hierarchy

Status in modern Burkina Faso is determined more by wealth than by traditional hierarchies. Urban areas generally are wealthier than rural, and urban dwellers typically are both healthier (see p3 of *Sustenance and Health*) and better educated (see p2 of *Learning and Knowledge*) than residents of rural areas. Consequently, it is no surprise that Burkina Faso is urbanizing an average of 5% per year.



Even in cities, however, wealth disparities have grown rapidly in Burkina Faso since the mid-1990s. While a small number at the very top of society have grown wealthy, standards of living for many Burkinabè have fallen. Despite this widening gap, wealth disparities tend to be less visible in Burkina Faso than in many other African countries because Burkinabè typically shun extravagant displays of wealth.



## 3. RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY



### Overview

Although exact statistics are unavailable, it is estimated that about 63% of Burkinabè are Muslim and about 22% Christian. Approximately 15% of Burkinabè identify as neither Muslim nor Christian but instead practice traditional religions exclusively. Although many communities long resisted Islamization and later Christianization, the country has had no major religious conflicts. Burkina Faso's constitution and other laws protect religious freedom, and as a secular

institution, the Burkinabè government actively supports religious tolerance.

### Muslim Faith

#### Origins of Islam

Islam dates to the 6th century AD, when Muhammad, whom Muslims consider God's final Prophet, was born in Mecca in what is today Saudi Arabia. Muslims believe that while Muhammad was meditating in the desert, the Archangel Gabriel visited him over a 23-year period, revealing the Qur'an, or "Holy Book," to guide their everyday lives and shape their lifelong values.

#### Meaning of Islam

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

#### Muslim Sects

Islam divided very early in its history into two sects based on different understandings of who should lead the Muslim community (*Ummah*). While the Sunni believed that the leader (*Caliph*) of the Muslim community should be elected, Shi'a Muslims believed the religious leader should be a direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad. Burkinabè Muslims are predominantly Sunni.

## Five Pillars of Islam

There are 5 basic principles of the Islamic faith.

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



## Shared Perspectives

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

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

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

**Jesus:** The 3 religions differ significantly in their understanding of the role of Jesus. While Christians consider him the divine Messiah who fulfills the Jewish Scriptures, Jews are still waiting for the Messiah to come. Muslims recognize Jesus as a prophet, but do not acknowledge the Christian view of his divinity. Nor do they believe in the Christian Trinity.

**View of Death:** Muslims believe that the time of death, like birth, is determined by Allah. While people grieve the loss of family members or friends, they do not view death itself as a negative event, as Muslims believe that a person who lived a good life goes on to live in Heaven.

### Concept of Jihad

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



### Ramadan

Ramadan is a month-long time for inner reflection, self-control, and focus on God. During this time, Muslims who are physically able are required to fast from dawn to sunset. Many Muslims believe that denying their hunger

helps them to learn self-control, appreciate the difficulties of the poor, and gain spiritual renewal—by fasting, one learns to appreciate the good in life. It is common for Muslims to break their fast at sunset with a light meal followed by prayer and then dinner.

Ramadan is observed during the 9th month of the Islamic calendar (see p3 of *Time and Space*) and includes 3 holy days.

- **Lailat al-Qadr:** Known as “The Night of Power,” this day marks Muhammad’s receipt of the first verses of the Qur’an.

- **Eid al-Adha or Tabaski:** This day is the “Festival of Sacrifice” and commemorates Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son, Ishmael (or Isaac, according to the Christian faith), as proof of his loyalty to God. It is celebrated the same day the Hajj ends.
- **Eid al-Fitr:** It is a 3-day “Festival of Fast-Breaking” celebrated at Ramadan’s end.

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

## Traditional Beliefs

Prior to the introduction of Christianity and Islam to Burkina Faso, an indigenous belief system characterized traditional society. A common indigenous practice was animism, a belief that spiritual forces inhabit natural objects such as trees and rivers and influence human existence.



Animists believe these natural objects are sacred and must be respected – a conviction that closely connects them to the natural environment. For example, some ethnic groups conducted rituals honoring supernatural powers thought to control soil fertility and rainfall. Many Burkinabè also believed that their ancestors’ spirits participated in daily life by guiding or obstructing their activities. Finally, most groups recognized the existence of a supreme being or creator god who was good, merciful, unknowable, and removed from daily life.

Religious beliefs and practices also played an important role in the Mossi kingdoms’ political structures (see p9 of *Political and Social Relations*). For example, in order to rule legitimately, all kings and district chiefs had to have **naam**, a supernatural power conferred upon them when entering office. In addition, a ritual specialist known as a **tengsoba**, or “earth-owner,” balanced the king’s authority by retaining control over soil fertility, rain, and harvest rituals that benefitted the collective.

Members of family lineages (see p1 of *Family and Kinship*) also performed rituals, sometimes directed at the spirits of their ancestors, in order to ensure good harvests and personal wellbeing. Many Burkinabè groups made elaborate wooden masks—some up to seven feet high—worn during these rituals and other ceremonies (see p5 of *Aesthetics and Recreation*).

## The Introduction of Islam

The linking of religious and political authority gave the Mossi kingdoms a strong foundation from which to resist invasions by neighboring Muslim empires, which began in the 14th century. Even when an individual Mossi leader converted to Islam—as, for example, the **Moro Naba** (King of Ouagadougou) did in the 16th century—mass conversions did not follow nor did the link between traditional religion and Mossi politics weaken.

Due to Burkina Faso's position between empires and along key trade routes, some Burkinabè became traders and eventually converted to Islam (see p2 of *History and Myth* and p9 of *Political and Social Relations*). With their valuable literacy skills, other Muslims obtained positions of authority in some



Mossi kingdoms. Nevertheless, despite the formation of several Muslim communities in the region, most Mossi resisted Islamization through the 19th century.

The religious landscape began to shift in the late 18th century, when the 24th **Moro Naba** built a mosque and installed an **imam** (Islamic teacher and prayer leader). In the North, Peulh and Tuareg communities increasingly fell under the influence of Islamic warriors from a Nigerian-based empire and converted to Islam (see p9-10 of *Political and Social Relations*).

As French forces overran Burkina Faso in the late 1800s, more Mossi converted to Islam. Some scholars speculate that Mossi lost faith in traditional beliefs and political structures in the face of overwhelming foreign might. While there were only about 30,000 Burkinabè Muslims at the end of the 19th century, there

were 80,000 or about 20% of the population by 1959. By the 1980s, around 40% of Burkinabè were Muslim.

## The Introduction of Christianity

The first Christian missionaries, the French Catholic White Fathers, opened a mission near Ouagadougou in 1901. In 1922, the French White Sisters founded an indigenous religious order known as the Black Sisters of the Immaculate Conception. The terms “White” and “Black” refer to the ritual colors of the robes these missionaries wore. In the 1930s, the White Fathers opened a mission in Bobo-Dioulasso focused on youth and vocally opposed the colonial authorities’ forced labor policies (see p4 of *History and Myth*). The first Mossi priests were ordained in 1942, and in 1956 a Mossi became West Africa’s first indigenous Catholic bishop.

In 1921, representatives of the American Assemblies of God became Burkina Faso’s first Protestant missionaries, and in 1933 they established a Bible school that educated Christian lay workers. Temple Apostolic Church, the first indigenous church, opened a few years later, and in 1961 a Protestant cooperative, the Federation of Evangelical Churches and Missions, opened.



## Religion Today

Regardless of their affiliation, most Burkinabè consider religion an important part of life.

In addition, they tend to tolerate people of other faiths, a stance that stems both from the government’s secularism and from the fact that most Burkinabè have family members of other faiths. Still, while Muslims form a majority, Christians dominate the elite. While this arrangement has not led to social tension, the Burkinabè government is careful to be inclusive by consulting Muslim religious and social leaders.

## Islam

While most Burkinabè Muslims live in the northern, eastern, and western border regions, many also live in cities. While Muslims are members of all ethnic groups, they form a majority among the Peulh and Tuareg. Most of Burkina Faso’s Muslims

adhere to the Maliki school of Sunni Islam, a generally tolerant school of thought that emphasizes community consensus and the primacy of the Qur'an over later Islamic teachings.



Some Burkinabè Sunnis align with Sufi brotherhoods, such as the Quadiriyya and Tijaniyya. These less orthodox forms of Islam stress simplicity in rituals, mysticism, and the formation of a personal connection with God. Observant Muslims

typically do not eat pork or drink alcohol.

### Christianity

Although towns in all parts of Burkina Faso have both Roman Catholic and Protestant churches, most Christians live in urban areas, and the vast majority identify themselves as Roman Catholics. Many Christian churches hold services in local languages (see p1-2 of *Language and Communication*).

### Traditional Beliefs

For many Burkinabè today, a traditional religious worldview infuses daily life. While beliefs and practices vary significantly, one commonality is the belief that spirits and spiritual forces intervene in people's daily lives, granting health and fortune or imposing sickness and hardship. Consequently, some Burkinabè consult a **féticheur** or diviner to obtain a **gris-gris**, an amulet or charm, to protect them from harm. Burkinabè may also perform dances meant to influence spirits.

Some Burkinabè also perform rituals meant to appease the spirits and bring fertility. Usually performed at so-called earth or ancestor shrines built near natural features such as hills, rocks, caves, trees, rivers, ponds, or termite hills, some of these rituals involve the sacrifice of animals such as chickens or



goats. Other types of animal sacrifice are performed after a crime has been committed to identify the offender and to call on the spirits to punish him.

Burkinabè who consider themselves Muslim and Christian also often perform such rituals. Some Muslims may refrain from certain ritualistic aspects that conflict with their Islamic beliefs, such as offering sorghum beer to the spirits. Others tend to embrace the rituals, even attributing the discovery of sacred sites to Muslim saints or scholars.

### Witchcraft Accusations

Burkinabè women who are elderly, widowed, disabled, poor, or lack the support of male relatives occasionally are accused of witchcraft. Men are the predominant accusers, although women within polygynous marriages sometimes indict each other (see p1 of *Family and Kinship*). A suspicious death sometimes compels men to identify the witch responsible by conducting a *siongo* (the bearing of the body") ritual which involves carrying the body through the village. In a trance-like state, the men receive guidance from the deceased's spirit, who leads them to the accused.

Witchcraft accusations usually result in mistreatment and sometimes violence against the accused, who frequently are banished from their villages. The government has prioritized the protection of accused witches since the 1990s. It recently implemented an action plan that provides legal, psycho-social, and physical and financial support to accused witches. Concerned that this plan is not sufficient, the Ministry of Social Action in 2013 developed a new strategy that calls for legislation to punish accusers and anti-witchcraft education for the general public.



## 4. FAMILY AND KINSHIP

### Overview

Family and kinship are an important part of Burkinabè identity and social structure, as most Burkinabè identify first with their family and secondarily with their ethnic group. Since much of Burkina Faso's population lives in rural areas, traditional family structures still have strong influence in the lives of Burkinabè.

### Family Structure

The extended family—which includes grandparents, cousins, uncles, and aunts—is an important part of Burkina Faso's daily life. Members of a single extended family tend to live in close proximity and help each other with financial matters and child-rearing. Most of Burkina Faso's ethnic groups (see p9-10 of *Political and Social Relations*) are patriarchal and patrilineal, whereby men hold most decision-making authority and family heritage is traced through the father's lineage. The eldest male typically serves as head of household.

**Polygyny:** Both legal and common in Burkina Faso, polygyny refers to the practice of a man having more than one wife at a time. About 1/3rd of Burkinabè unions are polygynous, representing one of the highest rates in Africa. According to **sharia** (Islamic law), a man may have as many as four wives at a time as long as he supports them equally.



**Children:** Children, especially boys, are a major source of happiness for a family. Since Burkinabè women typically bear as many children as possible, a couple may have an average of 4-5 children. Mothers or female relatives often tie or carry young infants on their backs while they perform daily tasks. From a young age, children are expected to

help with such chores as cleaning, caring for siblings, and collecting water or firewood. The oldest child, in particular, has significant responsibilities in the family. Young adults typically live with their parents until marriage.

## Residence

Burkinabè residences vary widely by region, ethnicity, level of urbanization, and socioeconomic class.

**Rural:** Around 67% of Burkinabè inhabit *yiris* (compounds) located in villages. Most extended families have their own *yiri*, which consists of several huts surrounded by an adobe (a blend of clay and straw) wall. This arrangement creates an inner courtyard for socializing. In most cases, men do not live in the same huts as women and children. Villages typically have neither electricity nor plumbing and instead get their water from wells. Whenever villagers build a *yiri* or plant a new field, the founder of the village—called the *chef de terre*, or “earth-priest”—typically performs rites in order to appease ancestral spirits (see p4-5 & 7-8 of *Religion and Spirituality*).



The style of rural dwellings varies by ethnic group. The Mossi, for example, build round homes from adobe, while the Peulh build hemispherical huts from straw. By contrast, the Gurunsi, Bobo, and Lobi build large homes with wood and mud walls and sometimes aluminum or zinc roofing. Such homes typically have elaborate exterior décor and may have several secondary structures that serve as kitchens, animal pens, or storage.

**Urban:** In order to reduce housing expenses, urban Burkinabè often share their dwellings with a large number of housemates or family members. While the rich tend to live in French-style homes with electricity and running water, the poor typically live in semi-permanent structures made of corrugated iron, plaster, and mud. Somewhat more affluent Burkinabè may also live in large cinderblock apartment buildings.

## Rites of Passage

Burkinabè across the different ethnic groups perform rites-of-passage ceremonies to mark life's transitions.

**Naming Convention:** The Mossi in particular name children in a formal ceremony held 3-4 days after birth, usually choosing names representing the day the child was born. For example,

the name **Hado** suggests that the child was born on a Sunday. Islamic names can be similarly suggestive. The name **Lokre**, for example, probably means that the person was born at the end of **Ramadan** (see p3-4 of *Religion and Spirituality*).

**Initiations:** Christians baptize their children about a week after birth, while Muslims circumcise their boys after a similar interval. In traditional society, boys were circumcised between ages 7 to 13. Boys usually endured the procedure at a secluded initiation camp, where they received several months of preparation for adulthood. Today, these camps remain only in the most isolated of areas. Many Burkinabè girls traditionally received similar lessons on marriage and motherhood. Female circumcision, also known as female genital mutilation (FGM), is still common in Burkina Faso (see p3 of *Sex and Gender*).

### Courtship and Marriage

Marriages traditionally functioned as an alliance between families. Consequently, parents or elders in the families of the prospective couple traditionally arranged most marriages. In modern Burkinabè society, the popularity of arranged marriage



has declined, especially in urban areas. Many Burkinabè now date and choose spouses on their own, although often with the blessing of family members.

While the legal marriage age is 20 for boys and 17 for girls, child marriage is common. Moreover, girls as young as 15 are legally allowed to marry in unspecified “special circumstances.” Weddings often are elaborate affairs involving a mixture of traditional, Islamic, and Christian customs.

**Bridewealth:** This term refers to a payment the groom’s family offers the bride’s as a compensation for the loss of the bride’s labor and presence. Bridewealth usually consists of cattle or money and must be transferred before the marriage is finalized. Although the groom’s uncle is supposed to negotiate bridewealth in the Islamic tradition, it is common in many ethnic groups—even those with Muslim members—for the parents of the bride and groom to negotiate directly.

**Levirate Marriage:** According to customary levirate marriage, widows are obligated to marry one of their husband's brothers if their first husband dies. Although obligatory levirate marriage is illegal in Burkina Faso, the practice is common. If a widow declines a levirate marriage, her family may have to return bridewealth received as part of the original marriage. In some cases, a widow's in-laws also may deny access to any children or property from the marriage (see p1-2 of *Sex and Gender*).

## Death

Since Burkina Faso has a hot climate and few refrigerated morgues, deceased Burkinabè are usually buried within 24-48 hours, although the interval can vary. Muslims are bound by their religion to bury their dead as soon as possible. Some Burkinabè believe that a body must be "interrogated" before burial in order to learn whether witchcraft or other foul play led to the death (see p8 of *Religion and Spirituality*).

Unlike burials, funerals may not occur until months after death. This arrangement gives out-of-town friends time to travel and allows the deceased's family to save money for funeral costs, which sometimes force families into debt. In rural areas, the deceased usually are buried near family compounds. A married woman may be buried near the compound of her birth family rather than that of her husband's family. Most Burkinabè funerals blend traditional, Islamic, and Christian rites.

### Traditional Funerals

Burkinabè believe that funeral rites must be performed so as not to offend the deceased or cause misfortune to befall the deceased's family. In traditional funerals, the deceased is represented by a board or blanket. An animal is slaughtered and presented to the "deceased" along with money or offerings. The "deceased" is then asked how he died, and his answers are derived from the swaying of the board or blanket. The "deceased" is then buried alongside various offerings. Thereafter, men wearing traditional masks (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*) are known to dance long into the night.

## 5. SEX AND GENDER

### Overview

Even though Burkina Faso has some of the region's strongest legal protections, women still experience gender discrimination. Primary reasons for gender bias are the influence of traditional attitudes and inconsistent enforcement of anti-discrimination laws. Burkinabè women also often bear heavy familial burdens.

### Gender Roles and Work

In rural areas, men and women have differing responsibilities, although there are some shared tasks now that gender roles are not as fixed as they were in the past. Women traditionally have been responsible for planting, tending, and harvesting crops, while men clear and plow land and hunt and butcher animals. In addition to their farming duties, women perform domestic tasks, including cooking, cleaning, caring for children, and collecting water and firewood. Many women also tend their own small plots



of farmland or sell goods from stalls to earn additional income.

In cities men are expected be the breadwinners and bring home the *naã songo*—the “money for the sauce.” Many women also make contributions to

family income—sometimes even larger than those of their husbands—while still playing the role of homemaker. Women comprise 51% of Burkina Faso's labor force and perform many of the same jobs as men, although women rarely are given managerial or decision-making authority.

### Gender and the Law

While Burkina Faso's constitution and several of its statutes prohibit gender-based discrimination, many women—especially in rural areas—are unaware of their rights or unable to assert them. Consequently, issues of family law—such as divorce and inheritance—often are decided under customary law (see *Political and Social Relations*), which favors men.

According to statutory law, for example, a woman is legally entitled to assume custody of all children and marital assets if her husband dies. Under customary law, however, the late husband's family has the power to decide whether the widow gets child custody and



may even force her to consent to a levirate marriage (see *Family and Kinship*). In addition, customary law stipulates that a woman's property becomes her husband's property upon marriage. Due to these customs, many Burkinabè women can neither keep possession of their own land nor inherit any new properties. Consequently, women find it difficult to secure bank loans, remaining dependent upon husbands and their families.

### Gender and Politics

Female political participation has increased markedly since the 1980s, when President Sankara (see *History and Myth*) promoted expanded women's rights. Between 1995 and 2006, the number of women in local and national government rose from 8.9% to 35.8%. In 2009, the National Assembly approved a law requiring each political party to allocate at least 30% of its municipal and legislative nominations to women. Yet, the law is written vaguely and does not specify consequences for non-compliance. As of mid-2024, Burkinabe women held 12 of 71 (17%) Transitional Legislative Assembly seats, a rate significantly below that of the US Congress (29%). Women also held 4 of 23 (17%) Cabinet posts.

### Gender Based Violence (GBV)

Rape is a criminal offense punishable by 5-10 years in prison. Although many cases are investigated, few Burkinabè women report rape due to shame and fear. Village leaders typically settle GBV disputes since Burkina Faso's laws address neither spousal abuse nor domestic violence. Those leaders commonly advise women to reconcile with their husbands on the grounds that abuse is preferable to divorce and seclusion. Although Burkina Faso does not have shelters for abused women, the government operates 13 **Maisons de la Femmes** (Women's Houses) that provide counseling.

## Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

A common practice among Burkinabè, FGM involves modifying the female sex organ in order to limit sexual pleasure and promote virginity. Even though Burkina Faso's government became one of the first in Africa to ban FGM and create a committee to contest its practice, those measures have yielded few positive results: in 2021, the World Bank reported that 56% of Burkinabè women had undergone FGM although the practice was made illegal in 1996. This lack of results is due partly to the reluctance of judges to impose fines and prison sentences on impoverished families. In addition, some Burkinabè have the procedure performed in Mali, where FGM is legal.



## Sex and Procreation

Burkinabè sexual attitudes are relaxed as compared to traditional Islamic beliefs. In a 2017 survey, about 25% of men and 60% of women age 18 and under reported having had sex. In 2021, 35% of

women reported using contraceptives, with the statistic even higher among married women. A 2004 National Family Planning policy gives all Burkinabè the right to use contraceptives, although many doctors will not prescribe them to a woman without her husband's consent. Moreover, as with other aspects of the law, many women are not aware of their right to use contraception. While abortion is illegal in most circumstances, the procedure is permitted when pregnancy results from rape or incest or threatens a woman's health.

## Homosexuality in Burkina Faso

Burkinabè typically hold conservative attitudes about homosexuality and do not discuss it openly. While homosexuality is not a criminal offense in Burkina Faso, some homosexuals face discrimination nonetheless. For example, members of some communities' pressure homosexual couples to relocate because they feel that homosexual couples set a bad example for children. At this time, the US State Department has a Status of Forces Agreement in place for Burkina Faso. Service members will be held accountable to the Uniformed Code of Military Justice.

## 6. LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

### Language Overview

Over 60 languages and dialects are spoken in Burkina Faso. French is the official language, spoken primarily in urban areas. Most Burkinabè speak one of their country's many indigenous languages (see below). Many Burkinabè are multilingual, particularly in urban areas where they speak a regional *lingua franca* or two along with their mother tongue.



### French

French colonizers introduced their language to Burkina Faso in 1890, where it became the official language following independence. Today, French is the main language used in government, education, and media. While most urban Burkinabè speak French, only 20-25% of the total population speaks it with any fluency. French-speaking ability is often seen as a status symbol.

### Indigenous Languages

The Burkinabè government classifies 3 indigenous tongues as national languages: Mòoré, Peulh, and Dyula. Like most of the country's indigenous languages, Mòoré belongs to the Gur branch of the Niger-Congo language family. Dyula and 11 other indigenous languages belong to the Mande branch of the same family, while Peulh belongs to the Atlantic branch.

### Mòoré

Mòoré (pronounced more-ray) is a more common indigenous language, spoken by more than half the population. Although Mòoré is associated with the Mossi ethnic group and their homeland in central Burkina Faso, many Burkinabè speak Mòoré as a second language. There also are communities of Mòoré-speakers in Mali, Togo, and other nearby countries. A French missionary working in Burkina Faso compiled the first dictionary and grammar book for Mòoré in 1933 (see p1 of *Learning and Knowledge*).



## Peulh

In 2021, about 8.4% of Burkinabè spoke Peulh, the language of the Peulh ethnic group. Spoken primarily in the North and East, Peulh is a popular *lingua franca* across West Africa. Moreover, there are communities of native Peulh-speakers in most West African countries.



## Dyula

Dyula is spoken in western Burkina Faso and the neighboring countries of Côte d'Ivoire and Mali. Initially associated only with a small ethnic group of the same name, Dyula has spread widely among Muslim traders in West Africa. Today, members of many West African ethnic groups speak Dyula in addition to their mother tongues. In Burkina Faso, for example, some members of the Bobo, Bwaba, and Senoufo ethnic groups speak Dyula. Due to the language's role in commerce, "Dyula" is sometimes used as a generic term for a Muslim trader.

## Other Indigenous Languages

**Gourmanchéma:** As of 2021, an estimated 5% of Burkinabè spoke Gourmanchéma, which is associated primarily with the Gurma ethnic group that inhabits eastern Burkina Faso, Benin, Niger, and Togo. Since many Gurma live in difficult-to-access villages with few or no schools, literacy among Gourmanchéma speakers is likely 8-12%, much lower than the 34% rate for the country as a whole (see p2 of *Learning and Knowledge*). Like Mòoré, Gourmanchéma is a Gur language.

**Tamasheq:** In 2021, less than 1% of Burkinabè spoke Tamasheq, which is associated with the Tuareg ethnic group of Algeria, Libya, Mali, Niger, and northern Burkina Faso. Unlike Burkina Faso's other indigenous languages, Tamasheq is part of the Afro-Asiatic language family (includes Arabic) rather than the Niger-Congo language family (which includes many sub-Saharan African languages, such as Swahili). The number of Tamasheq speakers living in Burkina Faso probably has increased with 36,372 Malian refugees (see p8 of *Political and Social Relations*) now living in the country.

## Origins of “Burkina Faso”

In 1984, President Sankara changed Upper Volta’s name to Burkina Faso, a name that combines elements of 3 indigenous languages (see p6 of *History and Myth*). **Burkina** means “honorable” in Mòoré; **Faso** means “native land” or “father village” in Dyula. **Burkinabè**—both a noun for inhabitants of Burkina Faso and an adjective for things that relate to the country—combines **Burkina** with the Peulh suffix **-bé**, which means “people of” or “children of.” Hence, Burkina Faso means “land of the honorable [ones],” while Burkinabè means “honorable people.” In many cases, Burkinabè refer to their country as “Burkina.”

### Communication Overview

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

### Communication Style

Burkinabè tend to be friendly and polite. They usually interact in a formal, regimented manner with superiors, elders, and new acquaintances and informal among family and friends. They typically communicate indirectly in order to avoid embarrassing or appearing to criticize anyone publicly. For example, when Burkinabè are asked inappropriate questions, they tend to answer vaguely or remain silent. Since Burkinabè value patience and modesty, they frown on displays of aggression, annoyance, or boastfulness. French-speaking Burkinabè tend to dispel anger by saying “**doucement**” (“gently”), indicating that they expect an indirect follow-up question that will allow them to share the problem.

**Taboo Conversational Topics:** Burkinabè regard topics like politics, religion, sex, and ethnicity as sensitive. Consequently, foreign nationals should avoid discussing these topics unless a Burkinabè initiates the discussion. In all cases, foreign nationals should never debate or argue about a topic.

**Plaisanterie:** Burkinabè typically practice the social custom of **plaisanterie** (“joking”), whereby individuals playfully yet inoffensively mock one another (see p9 of *Political and Social Relations*). Often revolving around sensitive subjects like ethnic identity, **plaisanterie** usually involves exchanges between certain pairs of Burkinabè ethnic groups such as the Gurunsi and Bissa or the Mossi and Samo. Burkinabè consider **plaisanterie** as a benign way of coping with inequalities resulting from ethnic tensions. Some ethnic groups in Ghana and Mali share a custom similar to **plaisanterie**.



### Greetings

As in much of Africa, greetings are an important part of social relations in Burkina Faso (see p10-11 of *Political and Social Relations*). The most common greeting is the handshake. While Burkinabè typically shake hands with every person in a room if possible, Muslims of different genders rarely shake hands with one another and instead nod in greeting (see p2 of *Time and Space*). Other physical greetings include touching temples, exchanging cheek kisses, clicking middle fingers during a handshake, or holding the other person’s forearm with the left hand while shaking with the right hand.

After handshakes or some other physical greeting, Burkinabè typically exchange inquiries about health, family, work, and a number of other topics. Regardless of the actual state of their affairs, Burkinabè answer these questions on a positive note.

**Visits:** When arriving at a home, visitors often announce their presence by clapping and saying “**Ko ko ko**.” Muslims instead may use the Arabic greeting “**As-salamu ‘alaikum**” (“Peace be upon you”), to which the host typically replies “**Wa ‘aleykum assalaam**” (“And upon you be peace”).

## Forms of Address

In most cases, Burkinabè address superiors, elders, and new acquaintances with the titles **Monsieur** (Mr.) or **Madame** (Mrs.) and the person's last name. In informal settings such as in a village, Burkinabè may also address even unrelated elders as **tonton** (uncle) or **tonti** (auntie). In some cases, Burkinabè use titles instead of last names. A teacher named Jean Ouédraogo, for example, might be called "Monsieur L'Instructor" instead of "Monsieur Ouédraogo." Burkinabè also may use the title **maître** (master) for lawyers or other professionals. Burkinabè who are well acquainted typically use first names.

## Sounds and Gestures

Like most people around the world, Burkinabè use sounds or gestures to emphasize or substitute for the spoken word. For example, Burkinabè may signal disagreement by using the tongue to make a clicking noise in the back of the mouth. Similarly, they sometimes express displeasure by rounding the lips and inhaling through the teeth. Burkinabè consider it rude



to beckon someone by shouting out the person's name or pointing with the index finger. Instead, they may whistle, hiss, or cup a hand with their palm facing the floor and then move their fingers in a sweeping motion toward themselves.

**Displays of Respect:** Burkinabè sometimes show respect for others by performing any of a range of physical movements. For example, two Burkinabè conversing may display respect by slowly lowering their bodies at the knees. Since each person attempts to stand lower than the other, both people eventually end up crouching. Similarly, a Mossi greeting a chief in a traditional, rural context may lie on the ground and throw dirt on his head, showing deference by burying himself symbolically. Women often kneel in order to show respect.

## Language Training Resources

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

## Useful Translations

English	French	Mòoré
Do you speak English?	Parlez-vous anglais?	Maam ka gomda ___ [soma] ye
Hello	Bonjour	Puusgo
How are you?	Comment allez-vous?	Y ganse?
I am fine, thanks, how about you?	Bien, merci, et vous?	Laafi bala, la foo?
Yes	Oui	Nye
No	Non	Ayo
Okay	Bien	Yel ka ye/Yaa sōma
Good morning	Bonjour	Ne y yibeogo
Good afternoon/evening	Bonsoir	Ne y zaabre
Goodbye	Au revoir	Wend na taase
Please	S'il vous plaît	Maan-y sugri
Thank you	Merci	Y barka
You're welcome	De rien	Yel ka ye
Excuse me/I'm sorry	Excusez-moi/Je suis désolé	Ysurgi/Ykabre
Today	Aujourd'hui	Rūnda
Tomorrow	Demain	Beoogo
Yesterday	Hier	Zaame
What is your name?	Comment vous appelez vous?	Fo yuur la a boë?
My name is ___	Je m'appelle ___	Mam yuur la a ___
What is the price?	Quel est le prix?	Yaa wān la?
How is your family?	Comment ça-va votre famille?	La y zak rāmba?
My family is well	Ma famille est bien	Ub keimame/Ub yaa laafi
1, 2, 3	un, deux, trois	A yembra (ye), A yiibu (yi), A baabo (ta)
4, 5, 6	quatre, cinq, six	A naase, A nu, A yoobe
7, 8, 9, 10	sept, huit, neuf, dix	A yopoe, A nii, A wε, Piiga

## 7. LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE

### Literacy

- Total population over age 15 who can read and write: 34%
- Male: 40%
- Female: 29% (2022 estimate)

### Traditional Education

While Burkina Faso's traditional educational methods varied across ethnic groups, they shared some commonalities. For example, many Burkinabè children learned by watching their parents and other community members perform such tasks as herding, harvesting, and household chores. Initiation camps also provided education (see p3 of *Family and Kinship*).



Burkinabè traditionally transmitted knowledge and information orally, as none of Burkina Faso's indigenous languages (see p1 of *Language and Communication*) had a writing

system until the colonial era. Instead, **griots** (minstrels) sang stories about the history of their peoples. In addition, adults conveyed morals, values, and customs through proverbs and folktales. Since formal schools have yet to reach all Burkinabè, traditional education continues to play a role in Burkina Faso.

### History of Formal Education

The French White Fathers, a Catholic missionary group, opened Burkina Faso's first formal school in 1901 (see p6 of *Religion and Spirituality*). Other Catholic and Protestant missionary groups soon followed with schools that taught Christianity, French, and some domestic skills for women.

The French colonial government created the first public schools in 1920 in hopes of assimilating the indigenous population to French culture. However, many indigenous people distrusted the French public schools. Some Peulh nobles sent slaves to the schools in place of their own children. Muslims founded Burkina Faso's first **Qur'anic** schools in 1950.

## Education after Independence

In 1958, then-autonomous Upper Volta (former name of Burkina Faso—see p4 of *History and Myth*) began to reform its education system. This new education system emphasized African culture while also providing some degree of employment training. Yet, at independence in 1960, only 6% of primary-school-age children and 0.5% of secondary-school-age children were enrolled in school. Since the country had no universities at the time, secondary school graduates traveled to Senegal or France to pursue higher education.

On the advice of foreign donors, Burkina Faso's government made further educational reforms, resulting in a dual education system: while Rural Education Centers (CERs) focused mostly on agricultural training, primary schools in cities offered a more academics-focused curriculum.

Implementing the new education system proved difficult, costly, and ultimately unsuccessful, as few rural Burkinabè enrolled their children in CERs. Some families distrusted formal schools, while others thought the CERs were inferior and waited for primary schools to be built in their region. Even in cities, academic achievement improved only marginally. In 1980, for example, Burkina Faso's literacy rate was just 8%.

## Modern Education System

In 2007, the Burkinabè government passed the Education Act, which made primary school both free and compulsory. This law led to a rapid growth in public school enrollment but so far has done little to improve low rates of school completion. In addition, since the hiring of new teachers and building of new schools has failed to keep pace with the influx of new students, many Burkinabè schools are even more overcrowded than they were before the Education Act: by 2018, the student-teacher ratio in primary schools had risen to 40:1—nearly twice as high as the world average and greater than the average for sub-Saharan Africa as a whole.





Although the Education Act made primary school compulsory, that provision is not enforced. Indeed, about half the country's students drop out of primary school before finishing their studies. In 2022, the United Nations (UN) reported that only 68% of primary-school-age

children were enrolled, with much higher rates in urban areas than in rural areas. Similarly, the UN reported that upper secondary school enrollment among children of the appropriate age was just 27%.

### Structure of Education System

The education system is patterned after the French model, with French the primary language of instruction at all levels. Indigenous languages sometimes are used in primary schools (see p1 of *Language and Communication*). Classes generally extend Monday-Saturday, breaking on Thursday. Formal pre-primary education is rare, although community-based preschools (*bisongos*) serve ages 3-5 in some urban areas.

**Primary:** Primary school starts at age 6 and includes 3 cycles of 2 years each: *le cour préparatoire* (preparatory), *le cour élémentaire* (elementary), and *le cour moyen* (middle). After 6 years students take an exam to determine their eligibility for a primary school completion certificate.

**Secondary:** Secondary school includes 2 cycles. The lower cycle is compulsory and includes 4 years of general study followed by a national exam. The upper cycle is voluntary and consists of 2 tracks: 3 years of general study, which ends in a *baccalauréat* exam and potentially university study; or 2-3 years of training for fields like law enforcement and nursing.

**Tertiary:** Established in 1974, the Université de Ouagadougou is Burkina Faso's largest institution of higher learning. It offers degrees in humanities, arts, and social and natural sciences. Since the 1990s several additional universities have opened, including the Polytechnic University of Bobo-Dioulasso and the Université Ouaga II. Religious and secular private universities also exist in Burkina Faso. The tertiary enrollment rate was 10% in 2022.



## Community Support for Education

Burkinabè have established several grassroots organizations in order to support schools and increase community involvement in the country's education system.

**Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs):** Operating at the local level, PTAs support education system by providing food and classroom materials, helping teachers find lodging, and repairing desks. PTAs are funded by student fees, which range from CFA 1,000-2,000 (US\$ 2-4) per year. With the passage of the Education Act, the Burkinabè government agreed to finance one year of PTA fees for girls whose families cannot afford them.



**Mothers of Students Associations (AMEs):** AMEs enable women to have a role in influencing a traditionally male-dominated culture (see p1-2 of *Sex and Gender*). AMEs clean classrooms, help prepare meals for students, and check in with the family when a child misses school.

**School Management Committees (SMCs):** Supported by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), SMCs give parents, teachers, and community leaders a forum through which to collaborate in supporting and maintaining schools. After SMC members are elected, they receive a week of training in school maintenance and administration.

## Informal Education

Informal education is available in some parts of Burkina Faso through Non-Formal Basic Education Centers (CEBNFs), the successor to the country's former CERs. Designed to serve drop-outs or people who never attended school, CEBNFs offer basic education and skills training in sewing, mechanics, masonry, and other fields. CEBNFs also teach practical skills related to health, gardening, animal husbandry, and HIV prevention. Many CEBNFs rely on non-governmental organizations for funding.

## 8. TIME AND SPACE

### Concept of Time

Life moves at a more relaxed pace in Burkina Faso as compared to Western society. Burkinabè typically concern themselves more with events and seasons than with schedules. Due to the growth of business and urban areas, this concept of time shows signs of shifting.

### Time and Work

Most businesses, banks, and government offices are open 7:30am-12:30pm and 3:00pm-6:00pm, Monday through Friday. In most establishments, there is a long break during the hottest parts of the day. Bars and restaurants often stay open until late in the evening, while some stores open from 9:00am until 12:00pm on Saturdays. Burkina Faso adheres to Greenwich Mean Time (5 hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time) and does not observe daylight savings time.



### Punctuality

Burkinabè typically accept a variety of reasons for tardiness and therefore do not emphasize punctuality. Even in contexts that involve advanced appointments, meetings often start as many as 2 hours late. There exists a prevailing attitude that tasks not done today can be completed tomorrow. Consequently, employees are not expected to work late, and deadlines are flexible. In urban areas, however, punctuality has grown more important in recent years. Moreover, Burkinabè typically expect foreign nationals to be punctual.

### Negotiations

Building relationships is fundamental to conducting business transactions and typically becomes an extended process. In many cases, decisions are not final until they are approved by an elder. Foreign nationals are advised to be patient during negotiations, as Burkinabè tend to view impatience negatively (see p3 of *Language and Communication*).

## Personal Space

For most Burkinabè, the distance between people interacting is related to the degree of familiarity between those people. For example, new acquaintances and members of opposite sexes typically stand at a distance of about an arm's length when conversing. Young people stand at a similar distance when having a conversation with elders or superiors. By contrast, relatives and same-sex friends stand much closer, usually within an arm's length. In public situations, such as riding the bus or standing in line, Burkinabè are accustomed to standing only 1 or 2 inches apart due to space constraints.



## Touch

Burkinabè of the same sex often make casual physical contact while conversing. This tendency is especially common for men, who often hold hands, walk arm-in-arm, or rest their hands on each other's legs. Burkinabè of different genders—especially Muslims—often refrain from making contact in public in order to maintain propriety. In the more Westernized cities, members of opposite sexes commonly hold hands in public.

## Eye Contact

Excessive eye contact can be regarded as rude or challenging. Although Burkinabè of equal social status usually make direct eye contact at the beginning of a conversation, they generally divert their gaze for the remainder of the interaction. Children usually avoid eye contact with elders as a sign of respect. Similarly, women avoid eye contact with men, while people of lower status avoid eye contact with those of higher status.

## Left Hand Taboo

Like people from many cultures in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, Burkinabè reserve the left hand for personal hygiene and consider it unclean. Consequently, they consider it offensive to use the left hand for handshakes, gestures, or passing objects. If a handshake is expected and a Burkinabè's right hand is unclean or occupied, he usually offers the right wrist instead.

## Photographs

Burkinabè—especially children—enjoy being photographed. As a courtesy, foreign visitors should ask permission before taking pictures of locals. Some Burkinabè may expect money in exchange for having their picture taken. It is illegal in Burkina Faso to take pictures of government personnel, communication posts, military bases, and the Presidential Palace. Violations of such laws can lead to fines and confiscation of equipment.

### Public Holidays

- January 1: New Year's Day
- January 3: **Fête du 3 Janvier** (commemorates the 1966 uprising, see p5 of *History and Myth*)
- March 8: International Women's Day
- May 1: Labor Day
- August 4: Revolution Day
- August 5: Independence Day
- August 15: Assumption Day
- December 11: Proclamation of the Republic
- December 25: Christmas Day

### Religious Holidays

- March – April: Easter Sunday (Christian)
- May – June: Ascension Day (Christian)
- Variable: **Eid al-Fitr** (Islamic)
- Variable: **Eid al-Adha/Tabaski** (Islamic)
- Variable: **Mawlid** (Islamic)

## Lunar Islamic Calendar

Muslims use the Islamic calendar to calculate when to celebrate religious holidays. Since the Islamic calendar is based on lunar phases, 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.

## 9. AESTHETICS AND RECREATION

### Overview

Burkina Faso's clothing, music, arts, and crafts represent a rich blend of indigenous cultures and foreign influences. Moreover, since independence the Burkinabè government has gained a strong reputation for promoting the arts.

### Dress and Appearance

While styles vary among ethnic groups, most Burkinabè prefer loose, colorful clothing. They generally take pride in projecting a neat and clean appearance.

**Traditional:** Among the Mossi ethnic group (see p9 of *Political and Social Relations*), clothing was made traditionally from long, narrow strips of cloth, which were white- or indigo-colored, sewn



together and tailored into garments. For men, those garments traditionally included long robes and loose flowing shirts worn over baggy, mid-calf-length pants secured by a belt. Mossi men traditionally wore hats made either of cloth (a style known as **pugulumaka**) or woven twine (**sapon zug peogo**). Mossi women historically wore—and today still wear—ankle-length, wraparound skirts called **pagnes**.

**Modern:** Today most Burkinabè wear a mix of traditional dress and secondhand clothing imported from the US and Europe. In cities, men typically wear trousers and a shirt in casual settings and add a jacket and tie for the office and other formal settings. Urban women usually wear a blouse over a **pagne** or pants. Many young people in urban areas prefer a t-shirt and jeans.

In rural areas, men usually wear a woven shirt over long shorts or cut-off jeans while working in the fields. Some Muslim men wear a long, loose robe called a **boubou**. Rural women usually wear a blouse or t-shirt over a **pagne**.

**Peulh Adornments:** Burkinabè women of the Peulh ethnic group (see p10 of *Political and Social Relations*) have a reputation for beauty and elaborate personal adornment. Many Peulh women tattoo designs on their face, lips, or chin, while others use intricate braids to embed silver coins or other pieces of jewelry into their hair. Some Peulh women also wear bright scarves and blouses with puffy sleeves.

## Recreation

In their spare time, Burkinabè enjoy telling stories, visiting family and friends, dancing, and playing or listening to music. Among Burkinabè women, gathering together and styling each other's hair is a favorite pastime, especially since many women like to change their hairstyles frequently. Men tend to socialize at beer stands known as **dolo cabarets**. On weekends, some Burkinabè also socialize and dance at bars and nightclubs.

## Sports and Games

**Games:** Burkinabè typically prefer simple games that can be played in many different settings. One of the most popular such games is **mancala**, (also called **awale**) in which two players try to capture each other's game pieces—usually pebbles or seeds—by moving them across a board with small slots, following certain rules. Some Burkinabè also play **lge**,



resembling jacks. Today, many Burkinabè men play checkers or cards, while urban children often play **le babyfoot** (foosball).

**Football:** Like almost all Africans, Burkinabè love soccer, or football as it is called throughout the continent. The national team—nicknamed **Les Étalons** or The Stallions—plays at *Le Stade de 4 Août* (4th of August Stadium), which seats about 40,000 and is located in Ouagadougou. While **Les Étalons** have had only limited international success, they managed a surprise second-place finish in the 2013 African Cup of Nations. In addition, they are one of Africa's highest-ranked teams in FIFA's World Rankings. Apart from the national team, several clubs belonging to small associations play at venues around the country.

**Cycling:** Due partly to Burkina Faso's mostly flat terrain (see p2 of *Political and Social Relations*), many Burkinabè enjoy cycling and participate in weekend races. Burkina Faso is also home to the Tour du Faso, a 10-day race patterned after the Tour de France. Held annually in late October, the Tour du Faso covers a different route of 800-900mi each year. Cyclists from across Africa and Europe participate in the event.

**Other Sports:** Burkinabè enjoy several other sports, including basketball, boxing, golf, handball, rugby, tennis, and volleyball. Wrestling also has a long tradition in Burkina Faso and remains popular today. Like neighboring Nigeriens, Burkinabè wrestlers continue to excel in African wrestling competitions.

## Music

**Traditional:** Music is and always has been an important part of daily life and special events. Traditionally, the Mossi have used such instruments as the **djembe** (an hourglass-shaped drum) and the **bendre** (a drum made from goatskin and dried gourds) to call men to battle or to accompany tales sung by minstrels known as **griots** (see p1 of *Learning and Knowledge*). Shepherds and nomads—especially the Peulh—traditionally have played wooden flutes and still are known for their handclapping and singing techniques. Many Burkinabè ethnic groups traditionally used various types of wooden xylophones, such as the **balafon** and **gyil**. Some Burkinabè musicians and musical groups, such as Gabin Dabiré and Les Frères Coulibaly, still use them today.

**Modern:** Today Burkinabè enjoy a variety of musical styles, from Afro Pop and **soukous** (African rumba) to American hip-hop and reggae. Music from Côte d'Ivoire, Cuba, and Mali is especially popular. A few musical groups from Burkina Faso have gained international recognition, the most notable of which is likely the traditional music group Farafina. Since the 1980s, Farafina has toured the US and Europe, partnering with a variety of musical groups such as the Rolling Stones.



## Dance

Dance historically has been an important aspect of Burkinabè rituals and ceremonies. For example, Burkinabè traditionally have performed the **mandiani** dance to celebrate weddings, good harvests, and rites-of-passage ceremonies (see p3 of *Family and Kinship*). Especially among Muslims, men and women usually have their own separate dances.

In some dances, performers wear masks to honor the dead, guard against evil spirits, and enable communication with ancestral spirits (see p 4 & 7-8 of *Religion and Spirituality*). When they wear masks shaped like animals, some performers accompany their costume with appropriate motions. Most Burkinabè maintain a deep respect for the power of masks, believing that masked dancers temporarily become whatever they are imitating.



## Theater

Several Burkinabè theatrical troupes perform a range of unpublished indigenous plays (few are printed) in addition to original productions. One of the most popular types of theater among Burkinabè is “forum theater,” which provides an opportunity for the cast and audience to discuss a play’s issues after each performance. Many Burkinabè performances address social issues, such as voting laws and HIV prevention. The oldest forum-style theater group in Burkina Faso is the *Atelier Theater Burkinabè* troupe of Ouagadougou, which still tours the country and performs in towns and villages.

## Cinema

Sometimes called the “Hollywood of Africa,” Burkina Faso has a long cinematic tradition, having produced a large number of talented actors, directors, and producers. One of the country’s best known cinematic figures is Idrissa Ouédraogo, a director who has received multiple awards at the prestigious Cannes Film Festival for such works as **Yaaba** (“Grandmother,” 1989). Similarly, Burkinabè director Gaston Kaboré has received multiple international awards for such films as **Wend Kuuni** (“God’s Gift,” 1983) and **Zan Boko** (1988).



Burkinabè cinema thrives because the government has invested heavily in the film industry since independence. In addition, Burkina Faso hosts the Pan-African Cinema Festival (FESPACO), which began in 1969 and held for 10 days every 2 years in Ouagadougou. More than 100 films were screened at FESPACO 2013, for which the theme was “African Cinema and Public Policy in Africa.”

### Literature

Before written literature came to Burkina Faso, minstrels (**griots**) transmitted history orally through poems, stories, and songs (see p1 of *Learning and Knowledge*). In modern Burkina Faso, several Burkinabè authors write both fiction and non-fiction French-language works. The first Burkinabè author to publish a novel was Nazi Boni, whose ***Crepuscle de temps anciens*** (*The Twilight of Bygone Days*) was published in 1962. Other famous Burkinabè novelists include Monique Ilboudou and Augustin-Sonde Coulibaly and one of the most prominent non-fiction writers, Joseph Ki-Zerbo, a historian.

### Arts and Crafts

Burkinabè are renowned for the diversity and quality of their handicrafts, which historically have filled both spiritual and practical needs. Traditionally, Burkinabè used wood to make stools, utensils, instruments, and other practical goods. From copper they designed rings, bracelets, and anklets intended to dispel misfortune, disease, and evil spirits. Many Burkinabè still wear such jewelry. In addition to their tradition of working with wood and metal, Burkinabè are known for making high-quality leather goods, including boxes, water jugs, satchels, and purses.



**Masks:** Many Burkinabè ethnic groups traditionally have used intricately carved masks in various rituals and ceremonies (see p5 of *Religion and Spirituality*). Materials and designs vary. Many masks are made from wood, while others are made from metal, cloth, or dried gourds. In addition, animal designs are common. For example, the Mossi make wooden antelope masks that can be as tall as 7 feet.

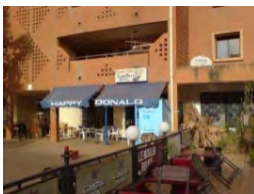
## 10. SUSTENANCE AND HEALTH

### Sustenance Overview

Burkina Faso's cuisine varies by region, season, religion, and economic status. While some French culinary influence lingers from the colonial period, the everyday diet of most Burkinabè consists of simple, traditional foods. Like many countries in its region, Burkina Faso faces serious food shortages.

### Dining Customs

Home cooking is an important part of the lifestyle of rural Burkinabè, who typically dine while sitting on the floor using their right hands to take food from communal bowls. By contrast, wealthier Burkinabè and those who live in urban areas typically prefer to dine at a table using utensils and individual plates. Both urban and rural Burkinabè tend to dine in silence. Women and children traditionally eat only after the men have had their fill. Consequently, females in poorer families often receive less food and consume fewer calories and nutrients than their male relatives.



Although Burkinabè tend to eat 3 daily meals, poor families may omit breakfast. Breakfast typically is served around 7:00am, consisting of coffee or tea with bread. It may also include **tô**, a porridge made from ground millet (see below), or leftovers from the previous day. Most schools and businesses close for 2-3 hours in the middle of the day in order to leave sufficient time for lunch, which is the largest meal (see p1 of *Time and Space*). Eaten around 8:00pm or even later, dinner tends to be a smaller meal, consisting mostly of lunch leftovers.

### Diet

Most main meals include millet or another staple (see below) served with a sauce consisting primarily of vegetables and sometimes includes bits of meat (see below). Since the South is wetter and better suited to crop cultivation than the North (see p2 of *Political and Social Relations*), food diversity tends to be much larger in the South.

**Staples:** While **tô**, also known as **sagabo**, is the most common starch, Burkinabè who live in the South also eat sweet potatoes and yams. Known in the region for their fondness for beans, Burkinabè also eat cakes made from boiled and mashed black-eyed peas. Other staples include baguettes, couscous, French fries, spaghetti, and rice. Since the latter is costly, poor Burkinabe are more likely to eat **tô** instead.

**Meat:** Also expensive, meat is added to most dishes in small portions. Poultry, beef, and dried fish are most popular, although members of some ethnic groups eat **pintade** (guinea fowl), **agouti** (cane rat), or caterpillar. Burkinabè who cannot afford meat often use cubes of meat stock to add flavor to their dishes. Most observant Muslims do not eat pork.

**Fruits and Vegetables:** Mangoes, bananas, baobab and shea fruit (from indigenous African trees), and other tropical fruits are popular snacks or are made into beverages. Burkinabè also consume vegetables like beets, green beans, okra, onions, peppers, pumpkin, tomatoes, zucchini, and vegetable leaves.

**Street Food:** Although Burkinabè rarely eat out, urban dwellers, day laborers, and travelers purchase food from street stalls on a regular basis.



For breakfast, stalls sell tea or coffee, bread, fried eggs, and French-style **tartines** (open-faced sandwiches). In afternoons they offer snacks, including yam chips, **gallettes** (donuts made from corn, millet, or wheat flour), or **brochettes**

(skewered chunks of beef, pork, or mutton) with a spicy chili sauce.

### Beverages

Burkinabè consume a variety of alcoholic drinks, including palm wine and **dolo** or **chaplao**, a beer made from sorghum in the Southwest and millet in other regions. In addition, local beers such as Brakina and SOB.B.BRA are popular. The most common non-alcoholic beverages are tea, juice, and soda. Most observant Muslims do not consume alcohol.

## Health Overview

Burkina Faso faces major health challenges. While the infant mortality rate has declined since 1990 from 121 deaths per 1,000 live births to 47 (2024 est.), it is Africa's 20th highest. The country's life expectancy of 64 years is on par with the regional average but remains far short of the global average of 73 years. Access to healthcare has improved in recent years, yet rural areas face a serious shortage of medical personnel and resources. Burkina Faso's most serious health threats include malnutrition and infectious disease.

## Traditional Medicine

Traditional medicine in a given region consists of knowledge, skills, and practices derived from the beliefs, experiences, and theories of the indigenous population and used to protect and restore health. Traditional healers use plants, herbs, and animal products to formulate treatments for a wide variety of conditions, even HIV/AIDS.



Since traditional medicine tends to be cheaper, more available, and more familiar to Burkinabè than Western-style medicine, about 80% of the population depends primarily upon traditional medicine for healthcare needs. For some ailments, Burkinabè may use a blend of traditional and Western-style medicine.

Historically, Burkina Faso's government has supported the use of traditional medicine. For example, the country's public health code recognizes traditional healthcare practitioners. In addition, the government-run Institute for Health Sciences Research has a research facility that tests the efficacy of herbal medicines.

## Modern Healthcare System

Even though the government subsidizes healthcare costs, much of Burkina Faso's population cannot afford medical services. The government currently is working to resolve this problem by installing a universal healthcare system, which is funded by both the government and private stakeholders and is continuing to expand coverage.

Burkina Faso's current healthcare system includes a number of public and private hospitals, nearly all of which are located in urban areas. Consequently, much of the largely rural population lacks easy access to healthcare. Furthermore, even urban hospitals tend to be understaffed and poorly equipped. In 2019, Burkina Faso had only 10 doctors per 100,000 people—about 1/2 the average for sub-Saharan Africa as a whole.

## Health Challenges

**Malnutrition:** Burkina Faso and other parts of West Africa suffer from food insecurity due both to environmental factors (drought and desertification, see p3 of *Political and Social Relations*) and social factors (poverty, corruption, and political instability). According to the World Bank, 17% of children under the age of 5 are underweight. Food aid (see p4 of *Economics and Resources*) alleviates Burkina Faso's food shortages somewhat.

**Malaria:** Malaria is endemic to Burkina Faso and spreads most rapidly in the rainy season (see p2 of *Political and Social Relations*). According to Burkina Faso's Ministry of Health, malaria was responsible for 60% of hospitalizations and 30% of deaths in 2021.



**HIV/AIDS:** Although Burkina Faso's HIV infection rate of 0.6% is on par with the global average of 0.7%, it is far lower than the Sub-Saharan African average of 3.8%. The government strives to maintain this low rate by providing free anti-retroviral medication to HIV-positive Burkinabè and conducting HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns. Still, HIV-positive Burkinabè often face isolation from their communities. Consequently, some parents refuse to get tested for the disease and thereby fail to avoid preventable mother-to-child transmissions of HIV.

**Other Diseases:** In addition to malaria and HIV, Burkina Faso struggles with tuberculosis, yellow fever, meningitis, hepatitis A, and typhoid fever.

## 11. ECONOMICS AND RESOURCES



### Overview

With around 41% of its population living below the poverty line, Burkina Faso is one of the world's poorest countries. It had lower a GDP-per-person in 2022 than all but 17 or so countries worldwide. Most Burkinabè

have no access to social welfare benefits like pensions or insurance. Those who do have access to benefits are employed mainly by the civil service, large private firms, or state-owned enterprises. These workers also tend to earn above-average salaries, contributing to the country's unequal wealth distribution: while the wealthiest 10% receive about 47% of Burkina Faso's household income, the poorest 50% receive approximately 15%.

Burkina Faso's poverty is the complex result of several factors. From an environmental perspective, the country has cyclical droughts, poor soil, comparatively few natural resources, and no direct access to the sea. These issues have some impact on mining and agricultural productivity. From an institutional perspective, the Burkinabè education system has failed to raise significantly the skill level of Burkinabè workers (see p2-3 of *Learning and Knowledge*). In addition, corruption remains a problem, although not to the same degree as in some parts of Africa. Finally, Burkina Faso lacks a physical infrastructure that can support rapid economic growth (see p1 of *Technology and Material*).

Given these limitations, about 80-90% of Burkinabè rely on subsistence agriculture for their livelihood. Several million of them also spend part of each year working in Côte d'Ivoire or Ghana on cocoa or coffee plantations. The proceeds these workers send home constitute a large portion Burkina Faso's GDP. Much of the remainder of the country's GDP comes from foreign aid, customs duties (taxes on imports), and earnings derived from gold and cotton exports.

## Agriculture

A majority of Burkinabè work in the agricultural sector even though agricultural activities – crop cultivation, livestock husbandry, forestry, and fishing – account for just 20% of GDP. Moreover, since Burkinabè farmers do not produce enough food to feed the entire country, food must be imported.

**Crop Cultivation:** About 47% of Burkina Faso's territory is agricultural land, about half of which requires irrigation. Consequently, most farming occurs in Burkina Faso's relatively well-watered Southwest. The main subsistence crops are millet, sorghum, corn, and rice, while the most popular cash crop is cotton. Some Burkinabè also grow sweet potatoes, yams, and **fonio** (a wild grass grown for its seeds) for their own consumption and green beans, **karite** (indigenous shea nuts), mangoes, peanuts, and sesame seeds for export or sale at markets.



**Cotton:** Introduced by the French in the early 1900s, cotton is by far Burkina Faso's most commercially important crop. Although gold now generates greater export earnings than cotton, Burkina Faso remains Africa's largest producer of cotton. Most Burkinabè farmers sell their cotton to 1 of 3 companies: the Burkinabè Society of Fiber Textiles (SOFITEX), the Cotton Society of Gourma (SOCOMA), and Faso Cotton. Those companies then gin the cotton (separate its fibers from its seeds) and export the resulting "cotton lint." Burkina Faso is 1 of 7 African countries in which some cotton is grown from genetically modified (GM) seeds. Although GM cotton is more pest-resistant, its seeds are controversial because their long-term effects are unknown.

**Livestock, Forestry, and Fishing:** Burkina Faso's livestock industry flourishes in the North, where farmers raise cattle, sheep, goats, horses, pigs, donkeys, chickens, and guinea fowl. The country's timber and fishing industries are much smaller due to the relative lack of waterways and forests. The timber industry has been constrained further by large-scale deforestation.

## Industry

Industrial activities constituted 29% of Burkina Faso's GDP in 2022, employing approximately 7% of the labor force. The most important industrial subsector is mining, which has expanded since the 2003 Mining Act liberalized mining laws.

**Gold:** In 2009, gold surpassed cotton as the country's main source of foreign exchange earnings and the industrial sector's key component. As of 2021, Burkina Faso had 17 "industrial" (large-scale, foreign-owned) and 600 "artisanal" (small-scale, domestically-owned) gold mines. In recent years, there have been tensions between artisanal miners and semi-industrial permit holders. While gold is found in all parts of Burkina Faso, the most productive mines are run by Semafo Inc. (operating the Mana mine), Endeavor Mining (Karma and Hounde mines), and IAMGOLD (Essakane mine). Burkina Faso's large mines are mostly foreign-owned, although the government holds a 10% stake in them.



**Other Minerals:** In addition to gold, Burkina Faso has deposits of manganese, limestone, copper, iron, bauxite (aluminum ore), silver,

zinc, among others. The poor condition of Burkina Faso's infrastructure (see p1 of *Technology and Material*) so far has hindered commercial exploitation of these minerals.

**Manufacturing:** Burkinabè manufacturing is limited due to high input costs, the small domestic market, and import competition. Production is limited to cotton lint, processed food and beverages, textiles, bricks, shoes, leather, and bicycles.

## Services

The services sector constitutes 41% of Burkina Faso's GDP and employs 20% of the population. Most services sector employees work for the civil service, which offers regular pay and job security. Many people who perform services make their living in the vast informal economy, which is not reflected fully in official statistics. These informal workers either perform services such as bicycle repair, tailoring, or blacksmithing or sell items, such as snacks and phone cards.



**Tourism:** Tourism accounted for nearly 2.3% of GDP in 2023, an increase from roughly 2% in 2021. The tourism industry employs nearly 2% of the workforce. Although Burkina Faso has a number of tourist attractions – including several national parks and events like FESPACO (see p5 of *Aesthetics and Recreation*) – it lacks the infrastructure to accommodate large numbers of tourists.

### Currency

Burkina Faso's currency is the West African CFA franc, which circulates in 5 banknote and 9-coin denominations that range in value from CFA 1-10,000. The West African CFA franc is pegged to the Euro at a rate of €1=CFA 652.88, meaning \$1 was worth about CFA 598 in 2023. Pronounced “seffa,” the West African CFA franc is used by 8 West African countries. In addition, 6 Central African countries use the Central African CFA franc, a distinct but effectively equivalent currency.



### Foreign Trade

In 2022, Burkina Faso's exports totaled \$5.8 billion and consisted primarily of gold, cotton, oil seeds, nuts, and zinc ore. The main purchasers of Burkina Faso's exports were Switzerland (74%), the UAE (7%), and Mali (4%). Burkina Faso imports totaled \$6.8 billion and consisted mostly of fuels, electricity, medications, and plastics. Burkina Faso's largest suppliers were Côte d'Ivoire (16%), China (12%), and Russia (7%).

### Foreign Aid

Despite President Thomas Sankara alienating many Western donors during the 1980s, Burkina Faso has become a favored aid recipient since Blaise Compaoré took power in 1987 (see p7 of *History and Myth*). In 2021 and 2022, Burkina Faso received \$1.59 and \$1.39 billion, respectively, in official development assistance (ODA), the largest single-country contributors have been France, the US, and Germany, while the largest organizational donors were the International Development Association, and the EU. In 2023, the US provided \$213.9 million in aid.

## 12. TECHNOLOGY AND MATERIAL

### Overview

Burkina Faso's physical infrastructure is largely inadequate. The country has limited public transit, few paved roadways, a single rail line, and a small, unreliable electrical grid. Burkina Faso's communications networks are fairly reliable.



### Transportation

Most Burkinabè walk when traveling short distances. Some also ride **mobylettes** (mopeds), **motos** (low-power motorcycles), or bicycles. A few Burkinabè still ride horses (a traditional symbol of social status, see p11 of *Political and*

*Social Relations*), although not an ordinary practice today. Privately owned taxis, share taxis, and **taxi-motos** (auto-rickshaws) are available in Ouagadougou for trips around town.

For longer trips, most Burkinabè travel in buses or minibuses. Although buses are nicer and more reliable, they are available only between larger cities and towns. Most buses operate on a fixed schedule and offer reserved seating. Minibuses, also known as “bush taxis”, cover routes to and from less prominent destinations. Minibuses do not operate on fixed schedules and instead depart only when full.

**Roadways:** In 2017, Burkina Faso had some 9,509 mi of roadways, mostly unpaved apart from those linking major cities. Although unpaved roadways are adequate for much of the year, they often become impassable during the rainy season (see p2 of *Political and Social Relations*). Moreover, even paved roadways often have potholes or other hazards.

Apart from maintenance issues, Burkinabè roadways can also be dangerous due to lax safety standards. Many vehicles are poorly maintained, carry far too many passengers, and lack essential equipment such as headlights. Authorities rarely enforce traffic laws, and both pedestrians and animals may enter roadways without warning.

**Railways:** In 2021, Burkina Faso had 321 mi of railways, which all were part of a 7,83-mi line between Kaya in central Burkina Faso and the Port of Abidjan in southern Côte d'Ivoire. Other important cities on this line include Ouagadougou, Koudougou, Bobo-Dioulasso, and Banfora. The line carries both freight and passenger traffic. As of 2021, plans to construct a rail line connecting Burkina Faso to Ghana were underway. The line would span approximately 745 miles, 29% of which would be located in Burkina Faso, and link 55 stations.

**Waterways and Ports:** Since Burkina Faso is landlocked and has few inland waterways, the country has no ports. Abidjan in Côte d'Ivoire is the closest major port to Burkina Faso (over 500 air miles from Ouagadougou).



**Airways:** Burkina Faso has 23 airports and airstrips, of which only the country's international airports—Bobo-Dioulasso Airport and Ouagadougou-Donsin International Airport—have paved runways. Upon completion of the Ouagadougou-Donsin International Airport, the original Ouagadougou Airport closed. Burkina Faso's national airline, Air Burkina, offers domestic flights between Bobo-Dioulasso and Ouagadougou and international flights to various West African cities, including Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire; Lomé, Togo; Cotonou, Benin; and Bamako, Mali. Other African airlines, such as ASKY (Togo) and Kenya Airways—offer similar routes. Global carriers like Air France and Turkish Airlines offer service to Europe.

## Energy

Approximately 1/5 of Burkinabè have access to electricity, and those who do live in cities. Consequently, most rural Burkinabè rely upon wood fuel or charcoal for their energy needs. Some rural dwellers also use solar panels or pay small fees to charge electronics in shops. For Burkinabè connected to the electrical grid, 69% of their energy comes from fossil fuels, while much of the remainder comes from hydropower. Since 2011, Burkina Faso has imported some electricity from Côte d'Ivoire's grid.

## Media

Burkina Faso's constitution and laws provide for free press and speech, which the government mostly respects. However, there is a debate between journalists who believe that libel (written slander) should not be a criminal offense and the government, which often punishes libel with one to two-year prison terms. Due to the potential for such penalties, self-censorship is common. In addition, low pay motivates some journalists to accept **gombo** (bribes) in exchange for positive coverage.

**Print Media:** The official, government-run daily newspaper is called **Sidwaya** ("Truth"). Popular private newspapers include **Le Pays**, **L'Observateur Paalga**, and **L'Indépendant**, the last of which offers a notably critical perspective on politics. There is also a popular satirical paper called **Journal du Jeudi** ("JJ").

**Radio and TV:** Radio is Burkina Faso's most popular medium for news and entertainment. The government owns and runs Radio Burkina, which broadcasts in French and 13 indigenous languages (see p1 of *Language and Communication*) from Bobo-Dioulasso and Ouagadougou. In addition, a range of low-power FM stations broadcast from large towns. Most rural Burkinabè trust these local stations more than other sources of news. TV is popular but rare outside urban areas. While the government runs a channel known as Television Nationale de



Burkina, private firms run other channels, such as Canal 3.

## Telecommunications

Burkina Faso's telecommunications networks are expensive but reliable by African standards. The popularity of mobile phones has grown quickly in recent years: although there were just 9 mobile subscriptions per 1,000 Burkinabè in 2002 and, by 2020, the rate had increased to 106 subscriptions for every 100 Burkinabè. With multiple providers, there is competition and hope for growth from a low base. The Internet's popularity has also grown rapidly with an 22% penetration rate. Even in rural areas, Burkinabè access the Internet through smartphones or laptops with mobile broadband cards.



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