AFCLC

EXPEDITIONARY CULTURE

FIELD GUIDE

Democratic Republic of Congo

U.S. AIR FORCE

About this Guide

This guide is designed to prepare you to deploy to culturally complex environments and achieve mission objectives. The fundamental information contained within will help you understand the cultural dimension of your assigned location and gain skills necessary for success.

The guide consists of two parts:

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

Part 2 presents "Culture Specific" the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), focusing on unique cultural features of the DRC'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/ or contact AFCLC's Region Team at AFCLC.Region@us.af.mil.

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PART 1 – CULTURE GENERAL

What is Culture?

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

Members of a culture also usually assign the same meanings to the symbols in that culture. A symbol is when one thing – an image, word, object, idea, or story – represents another thing. For example, the American flag is a physical and visual symbol of a core American value – freedom. At the same time, the story of George Washington admitting to having chopped down a cherry tree is also symbolic, representing the importance Americans place on personal honesty and leadership integrity.

Force Multiplier

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

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

economic institutions that reflect their cultural beliefs and traditions.

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

Cultural Domains

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

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

Social Behaviors Across Cultures

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

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

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

Worldview

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

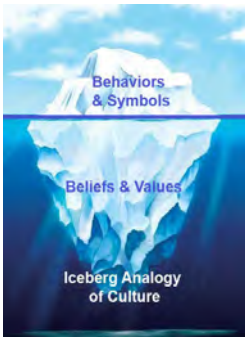
As depicted in the chart below, we can apply the 12 cultural domains to help us compare similarities and differences across cultures. We evaluate others' behavior to determine if they are "people like me" or "people not like me." Consequently, we assume that individuals falling into the "like me" category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

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

Cultural Belief System

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

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



Core Beliefs

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

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

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

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

CULTURAL DOMAINS

1. History and Myth

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

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

wisdom were preserved across generations and ethnic boundaries through oral folk legends or myths. Most early human evolution began as hunting and gathering cultures in East and South Africa, with countries such as Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, and South Africa renowned for their early human sites. In the last several millennia, the development of agriculture and pastoralism (animal herding) replaced hunting and gathering lifestyles.

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

6. Language and Communication

Language is a system for sharing information symbolically, whereby words are used to represent ideas. Communication is defined as the cultural practice of sharing meaning in interaction, both verbally and non-verbally. America is predominantly a monolingual society, where traditionally, fluency in a second language has been considered a luxury rather than a necessity. Conversely, national survival for many societies in Africa required them throughout their existence to adopt multilingual

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

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

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

While communication styles tend to vary by ethnic or social groups, Africans generally are friendly and outgoing people although they tend to communicate with reserve to avoid confrontation. As in most kin-based societies, Africans believe that saving face or protecting one's honor and dignity are of utmost importance; therefore, they avoid public criticism and controversial topics at all costs – even to the extent of withholding their honest opinion or modifying the truth.

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

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

7. Learning and Knowledge

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

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

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

However, progress in developing and maintaining reliable educational institutions has been slow for a variety of reasons. Since most Africans live in rural environments, they continue to rely heavily on child labor for family survival, resulting in decreased school enrollments or early withdrawals. Likewise, widespread HIV/AIDS epidemics, ethnic conflict, teacher and resource deficits, and inaccessibility to remote rural areas also hamper progress. According to 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-born bacterial diseases such as cholera and schistosomiasis are common.

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

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

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

11. Economics and Resources

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

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

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

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

12. Technology and Material

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

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

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

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

PART 2 – CULTURE SPECIFIC

1. HISTORY AND MYTH

Overview

The territory comprising present-day Democratic Republic of the Congo (also known as the DRC or Congo-Kinshasa) has a long and troubled history. Since assuming its earliest unified political form in the 19th century, the DRC has steadily endured resource-driven violence and authoritarian rule.

Early DRC

While little is known about the DRC's early history, its original inhabitants were probably ancestors of modern central Africa's Pygmy peoples (see p11 of *Political and Social Relations*). Small groups of these hunter-gatherers may have inhabited the rainforests of northern DRC as early as 10,000 years ago.

Perhaps as early as 2000 BC, Bantu-speaking peoples (see p1 of *Language and Communication*) began arriving in the Congo River Basin (see p2 of *Political and Social Relations*) from their original home along the border of present-day Cameroon and Nigeria. Groups of Bantu-speakers eventually settled in the savannas of southern DRC and began cultivating crops. Eventual contact with non-Bantu speakers influenced some of them to pursue cattle raising.

By 1000 AD, Bantu-speakers had expanded throughout the DRC where they interacted with Pygmies, assimilating to their unique local cultures. Since the region's rainforests presented barriers to communication, large political structures were slow to form. In many areas, the predominant political component long remained that of a small, lineage-based society governed by democratic consensus. In other areas, large states developed.

Early Political Structures

Between the 1400s-1600s a number of large, centralized political structures emerged in the savannas of southern DRC. Most of them had sophisticated hierarchies and were ruled by a monarch in conjunction with a council of elders and civil servants. The most prominent early political structures in the region were the Kongo, Luba, and Lunda Kingdoms.

Kongo Kingdom: The Kongo Kingdom first rose to prominence in the late 14th century, after members of the Kongo ethnic group (see p10 of *Political and Social Relations*) migrated south of the Congo River and founded their capital city of Mbanza Congo in northern Angola. Relative to other African states of the same era, the Kongo Kingdom was developed, having a bureaucracy that collected taxes and regulated a currency (sea shells). The inhabitants of the Kongo Kingdom worked as both merchants of copper and ivory and as craftspeople of metal and textiles. They also were a primary source for the European-led slave trade.

Luba and Lunda Kingdoms: The Luba and Lunda Kingdoms were separate but closely linked states that flourished between the 16th-19th centuries in southern DRC and northeastern Angola. The Luba and Lunda peoples traded copper, ivory, palm oil, other goods, and slaves with traders from both the East (coastal Tanzania) and the West (Angola).

Arrival of Outsiders

In the 15th century, a succession of outsiders from Europe and other parts of Africa began to arrive in the DRC. These outsiders typically were more interested in obtaining copper, ivory, and slaves than in forming permanent settlements or colonizing the Congo River Basin. The savanna kingdoms fared poorly against these outsiders due to internal feuds. Likewise, the lineage-based societies not affiliated with a kingdom were too fragmented to offer effective resistance.

Europeans: The first European to reach the DRC was Diogo Cão, a Portuguese explorer who arrived at the mouth of the Congo River in 1483. Soon after Cão's initial visit, the Portuguese made further expeditions to the region where they developed peaceful ties with the Kongo Kingdom. The latter supplied ivory and slaves in return for European goods such as guns, textiles, and wine. Eventually, this relationship was undermined by the rapid growth of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

Although slavery had long existed in the Kongo Kingdom, the slave supply traditionally was limited to prisoners captured in local conflicts. In addition, most slaves held in Africa became citizens of their communities within a generation. As the Portuguese developed plantations in their colony of Brazil, demand for slaves began to outstrip supply. Consequently, the Portuguese began to sponsor raids to kidnap and enslave more Africans. This process played a major role in the forcible relocation of an estimated 5.7 million people from West Central Africa to the New World between 1500 and 1866. The violent appropriation of so many inhabitants destabilized the Kongo Kingdom, which entered a slow decline in the 17th century.

Afro-Arabs: The slave trade was not limited to Atlantic Ocean ports. By the early 19th century, Afro-Arab traders had arrived in the eastern DRC from their base in coastal Tanzania. They initially bartered for and later forcibly took ivory, copper, and slaves to ports located along Indian Ocean trade routes. Some Afro-Arab merchants amassed trade-based empires in the region. Eventually, these indigenous resources were exhausted, contributing to the decline of the Luba and Lunda Kingdoms in the 1800s.

Egyptians and Sudanese: Traders based along the Nile River in Cairo (the Egyptian capital) and Khartoum (the Sudanese capital) began filtering into northeastern DRC in the 1820s. Like the Afro-Arabs, these traders were interested primarily in ivory and slaves.

Exploration and Colonization

European traders and explorers began to penetrate the DRC's periphery in the early 19th century, extending their expeditions into the vast Congo River Basin by the end of the century. The first such explorer was James Tuckey, an Anglo-Irishman who traveled 300 mi up the Congo River in 1816 before being forced to turn back in an area near today's capital, Kinshasa. Other European explorers followed Tuckey, although none surpassed his progress for more than half a century. Finally, in 1877, a Welsh-American explorer named Henry Morton Stanley completed a 999-day journey that began in coastal Tanzania and ended at the mouth of the Congo River.

Stanley's feat attracted great attention in Europe, particularly from King Leopold II of Belgium, who hired Stanley to facilitate the King's quest to amass a colonial empire. Leopold sent Stanley to the Congo River Basin, instructing him to purchase as much land as possible. Since Leopold's colonial ambitions lacked the support of the Belgian parliament, he acquired the land in his own right using the International Association of the Congo (known by its French initials AIC) as an ostensibly charitable front. By 1884, Stanley had tricked local rulers into signing a collective total of about 450 treaties ceding their land to the AIC.

That same year, representatives of the European colonial powers met in Berlin to decide the terms under which each country would pursue colonizing the African continent. Although Belgium as a country did not participate in the conference, Leopold's representatives worked behind the scenes to convince the major powers to recognize the King's African claims (most of what is now the DRC) as a privately-owned colony to be known as the Congo Free State. The major powers liked the idea of having a politically neutral buffer colony in the center of the continent, so they agreed to Leopold's unusual arrangement. Their only conditions were that Congo Free State would remain off-limits to slavery yet open for global trade of all other goods.

Congo Free State

Despite the proposed philanthropic aims of the AIC, Leopold was primarily interested in securing his prominence among the colonial powers. Since Belgium's parliament refused to support those ambitions financially, Leopold sought a way to finance the colony's administration by exploiting its natural resources. Although the slave trade had been abolished, the Congo Free State still had large amounts of copper and ivory. In addition, it had rubber vines which became highly lucrative after Scottish entrepreneur John Dunlop invented the inflatable tire in 1888.

In order to exploit these resources as economically as possible, Leopold granted European companies concessions to control defined areas in exchange for a share of the profits. He also allowed those companies to extract these resources using forced African labor, creating the Force Publique—a private African military led by Europeans—to enforce his policies.

The concession companies, the Force Publique, and bounty hunters all used cruel techniques to discipline African laborers. In some cases, they disfigured (usually by cutting off a hand) or killed those who tried to flee forced labor. In other cases, they held a laborer's family hostage until he met certain production quotas. In just 20 years, these abusive techniques along with other factors like disease and malnutrition, led to the deaths of an estimated 5-8 million Congolese.

Exposure: Although the world remained ignorant of Leopold's atrocities for years, foreign travelers eventually brought attention to the issue, two of which were Americans—GW Williams, a reporter, and WH Sheppard, a missionary. Pressure for change mounted further after a pair of Englishmen founded the Congo Reform Association (CRA) in 1904. In 1906, the Belgian parliament decided to buy the Congo Free State from Leopold. After 2 years of haggling over the price, the Congo Free State became the Belgian Congo colony on November 15, 1908.

Belgian Congo

Although widespread publicity had generated popular support for ending the horrific labor practices in the Congo Free State, the new Belgian Congolese government continued to operate using the same economic model of European concession firms and forced African laborers to extract resources. Furthermore, the Belgian administration proved no more willing than Leopold's to grant political rights to indigenous Congolese.

Nevertheless, living standards rose in Belgian Congo, primarily due to an expansion of copper and diamond mining (see p3 of *Economics and Resources*). These lucrative resources led to the development of urban areas, including Élisabethville (now Lubumbashi) and Léopoldville (now Kinshasa).

Belgian activities, especially those of missionaries, also led to higher living standards through the creation of schools, health clinics, roadways, and railways. Despite these improvements, few Congolese were educated past the primary level, leaving Belgian Congo with few people capable of administering the colony when it eventually gained independence.

Nationalism and Independence

Independence movements emerged in Belgian Congo in the 1950s. Unlike the inhabitants of other African colonies, the population of Belgian Congo shared little sense of collective identity. Consequently, movements were fragmented by region and ethnicity. For example, a significant ethnic movement known as the ***Alliance des Bakongo*** (ABAKO)—literally the "Alliance of the Kongo People"—became politically active in the late 1950s under the leadership of a civil servant named Joseph Kasavubu.

Despite this fragmentation, a brewery worker named Patrice Lumumba founded a movement with a national focus—the ***Mouvement National Congolais*** (MNC)—in 1958. Due to speeches and demonstrations organized by both ABAKO and the MNC, a national consciousness emerged almost overnight among the Congolese as calls for independence grew louder in the last few years of the 1950s.

By the close of the 1950s, many independence demonstrations had turned violent, and security forces were increasingly less able to contain the mounting chaos. Consequently, the Belgian government called 45 representatives from various Congolese groups to Belgium in January 1960 to plan for independence. Just 5 months later on 30 June 1960, Belgian Congo became an independent country, the Republic of the Congo. Due to elections held the month before, Patrice Lumumba became Prime Minister while Joseph Kasavubu became President.

The Congo Crisis

Just days after independence, a series of events started to destabilize the Republic of the Congo. On 4 July 1960, Congolese army soldiers mutinied against their officers over low pay and a lack of advancement opportunities, eventually leading to the appointment of Joseph-Desiré Mobutu as chief-of-staff. Hardly a week later, the Belgian government sent paratroopers with the pretext of protecting Belgians who had remained after independence. On 11 July, the mineral-rich Katanga Province seceded from the Republic of the Congo with the support of Belgian business owners, prompting the United Nations (UN) to send a peacekeeping force 4 days later.

The situation continued to deteriorate. Less than a month after the UN force arrived, South Kasai Province seceded, followed a month later by a Mobutu-led coup that toppled and later assassinated Lumumba but left Kasavubu in office as figurehead. Antoine Gizenga, the self-proclaimed successor to Lumumba, formed a rival government in Stanleyville (now Kisangani) that controlled the eastern half of the country.

By mid-1961, the Stanleyville government had been dissolved, and the Congolese army recaptured South Kasai by the end of that year. Katanga's secession did not end until early 1963, by which time UN forces had spent 2.5 years battling a Katangan army composed primarily of well-trained foreign mercenaries. Despite this victory, smaller rebellions and general instability continued for several years.

After free and fair elections in March 1965, Kasavubu remained President while Moise Tshombe—former leader of secessionist Katanga Province—became Prime Minister. The leaders soon became locked in a power struggle, which Mobutu used as a ploy for staging a second coup in November 1965 and declaring himself President for the next 5 years.

The Mobutu Era

Mobutu soon purged the Army of those he believed to be disloyal then deployed troops to suppress continuing rebellions in the East. Soon thereafter, he founded the Popular Movement of the Revolution (MPR in French), banning all other political parties. Having firmly entrenched his power, Mobutu controlled the country's politics both directly or indirectly for more than 3 decades.

While Mobutu initially provided some degree of public services, his rule ultimately became known for incompetence, cronyism, and corruption. His government extracted large bribes through both grand and petty corruption. In addition, Mobutu embezzled foreign aid and export revenues, living an extravagant lifestyle financed by a fortune estimated at $5 billion in 1985.

Despite his flaws, Mobutu was an ally of the US and its Cold War allies. At home, he suppressed rebellions of leftist groups sympathetic to the Eastern Bloc. Abroad, he supported a rebel group against the Communist-backed Angolan government.

"Authenticity": In the early 1970s, Mobutu introduced a series of policies intended to purge the Congo's colonial heritage. He changed the name of both the country and its namesake river to "Zaire"—a variation of ***nzadi***, a local word meaning "river"—and replaced the European names of many cities with African ones (for example, Léopoldville became Kinshasa). In addition, he required Congolese to abandon their Christian names and adopt African ones, changing his own name to Mobutu Sese Seko. Ultimately, these reforms went beyond the symbolic. As part of a policy known as "Zairianization," for example, Mobutu nationalized foreign businesses in 1973, dissuading many foreign businesses from investing in the country.

Pressure for Reform: By the end of the 1980s, a combination of Mobutu's embezzlement, falling global copper prices, failed nationalization policies, and inflation had damaged the Zairean economy severely. Along with rampant human rights violations, these economic problems prompted increasing calls for reform in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Around the same time, the end of the Cold War made Western governments less willing to support Mobutu unconditionally. Consequently, in August 1991, Mobutu agreed to participate in a constitutional convention with opposition leaders. Although this convention led to a series of opposition governments over the next 6 years, Mobutu co-opted or otherwise controlled them all from behind the scenes.

First Congo War

The beginning of the end for Mobutu's regime came in 1994, when Rwanda, Zaire's neighbor to the east, descended into civil war. Between April and July of that year, the ethnic Hutu Rwandan government conducted a genocidal mass slaughter against the county's ethnic Tutsi minority, resulting in an estimated 800,000 deaths. As Tutsi-affiliated forces took control of Rwanda, around 2 million Hutus fled to refugee camps in Zaire and Tanzania.

Some of those Hutu refugees resumed attacking Tutsis in Zaire and, to a lesser extent, western Rwanda. In 1996, it ostensibly was those attacks that prompted the Rwandan government—which had become Tutsi-affiliated—to invade Zaire alongside Burundi and Uganda. Rwanda and Uganda also sponsored the creation of a rebel group known as the alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire (AFDL in French) and chose Laurent-Désiré Kabila, a rebel fighter, as its leader. The combined force faced little resistance as it marched across the country to Kinshasa. In May 1997, Kabila was named President of the renamed Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Mobutu fled to Morocco, where he died of cancer 4 months later.

Second Congo War

Rwanda advocated Kabila, having an ulterior motive of appropriating DRC's resources (see *Economics and Resources*). Consequently, Rwandan troops remained in the DRC after Kabila took power, although generally were considered among the locals as occupiers. Kabila asked the Rwandans to leave, although they refused. Consequently, ties between Kabila and his First Congo War allies became increasingly strained.

In August 1998, Rwanda, Uganda, and Burundi invaded the DRC to support the rebellion of a Rwanda-backed group known as the Congolese Rally for Democracy (RCD in French). The combined force almost captured Kinshasa but was stopped after Angola and Zimbabwe intervened. Chad, Namibia, and other countries came to Kabila's defense, causing the war to become a stalemate. Meanwhile, the RCD splintered. Led by Jean-Pierre Bemba, the most important faction became known as Movement for the Liberation of the Congo (MLC).

More than 4 million people are estimated to have perished during the conflict, most of whom were civilians suffering from disease. The UN brokered a ceasefire in 1999, yet the war did not subside until January 2001, when his bodyguards assassinated Kabila, replacing him with his son, Joseph Kabila.

The Younger Kabila

The younger Kabila quickly sought a lasting peace deal. After agreeing to a ceasefire in February 2001, the warring sides signed the Sun City Agreement in December 2002. This deal provided for the establishment of a Kabila-led transitional government that would include representatives of the main rebel groups and political opposition. Although various conflicts continued, especially in the eastern DRC (see p7 of *Political and Social Relations*), this accord enabled DRC's government to reassert some degree of control. Widely seen as more competent than his father, Kabila was reelected in 2005, and 2011, although not without some controversy over the results.

Myth Overview

Since many Congolese languages did not have written forms until relatively recently (see p2 of *Language and Communication*), the country has a tradition of oral folklore as rich and reflective as its extensive history. Although oral traditions vary between the DRC's ethnic groups, many Congolese myths share common elements. For example, some myths depict the main characters as animals that embody and represent gluttony, intelligence, and other human characteristics. This type of myth usually conveys a moral message. Other myths are closer to historical narrative. For example, the myth below explains the origins of the Bakuba people, who live in the Kasai region of the southeastern DRC.

Bakuba Creation Myth

In the beginning, a white giant and god of creation named Mbombo ruled the world, which then consisted of nothing more than water and darkness. One day Mbombo felt a throbbing pain in his stomach and soon thereafter began to heave up the first heavenly bodies: the Sun, the Moon, and the Stars. The new Sun shone strongly, and soon both the darkness and the water that had constituted the world had disappeared, with the water evaporating into clouds and exposing dry land.

Mbombo heaved again and released a variety of new things: lightning and falling stars; firmament studded with plants and trees; the first monkey, eagle, leopard, fish, and insects; and, finally, the first man and woman. The man and the woman had 2 children, a son named Woto and a daughter named Labama.

Woto and Labama eventually married one another and moved westward until they settled in a desert. Labama disliked the desolate landscape, so Woto called forth an entire forest from the sand with a few blows of his horn. Woto and Labama then settled in a forest dwelling and began raising children, who would be the earliest ancestors of the Bakuba people.

2. POLITICAL AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

Official Name
Democratic Republic of the Congo

Political Borders
Central African Republic: 980 mi
South Sudan: 390 mi
Uganda: 475 mi
Rwanda: 135 mi
Burundi: 145 mi
Tanzania: 285 mi
Zambia: 1199 mi
Angola: 1560 mi
Republic of the Congo: 1498 mi
Coastline: 23 mi

Capital
Kinshasa

Demographics
The DRC's 115.4 million population has an annual growth rate of about 3.11%. While only about 47% of the population is urban-based, the DRC's urban populace grows an average of 4.33% annually which is slightly higher than sub-Saharan Africa's urbanization rate. Nearly 46% of the population is younger than 15.

Flag
The DRC's flag is sky blue, with a star in the upper left corner and 3 diagonal stripes that extend from the lower left corner to the upper right. The thickest red stripe commemorates martyrs who have died for the DRC, while the yellow star and 2 thinner yellow stripes signify the DRC's wealth. The star represents the DRC's unity and bright future, while the sky-blue background symbolizes peace and hope.

Geography

Located in the center of the African continent, the DRC has a total area of 905,355 sq mi, an expanse roughly the same size as the portion of the US lying east of the Mississippi River. The DRC borders the Republic of the Congo (ROC) to the west; the Central African Republic (CAR) and South Sudan to the north; Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and Tanzania to the east; and Zambia and Angola to the south.

The DRC's most prominent physical feature is the Congo River, from which the country takes its name. The Congo River cuts a winding, 2,900-mi arc across the DRC, flowing northwards from the southeastern frontier before veering west at Kisangani and ultimately turning south toward its mouth on the Atlantic Coast. Second only to the Amazon River in volume, the Congo River is fed by numerous tributaries, of which the most important are the Lomami, Kasai, and Ubangi rivers.

Those tributaries lie in a region known as the Congo Basin. Covering about 1.3 million sq mi—including most of the DRC and parts of 6 other central African countries—the Congo Basin consists of a bowl-like depression filled with swamps and rainforests. It is bounded by the Atlantic Ocean to the west, the Ruwenzori and Virunga mountain ranges and Africa's Great Lakes to the east, and plateaus of 4,000-5,000 ft in elevation to the north and south. The DRC's highest point is Mount Stanley, which rises 16,763 ft along the Ugandan border. The DRC has a 23-mi Atlantic Ocean coastline at the Congo River's mouth.

Climate

The DRC has a tropical climate. Temperatures fall between 70-80°F in most regions and seasons, although the mountainous East tends to be cooler. Most of the country gets 20-40 inches of rainfall from May-October, although rains tend to be heavier in the North during that time of year. From November-April, the North gets the same 20-40 inches of rainfall while the South receives 40-60 inches. Only the far Southeast has a dry season, which lasts from May-September.

Natural Hazards

DRC's primary natural hazard is flooding, especially from the Congo River. Most flooding occurs between November-January, when the well-watered South gets its heaviest rainfall. A second natural hazard is volcanic activity, especially that of Mts. Nyiragongo and Nyamuragira in the Virunga Mountains.

Environmental Issues

Extensive mining and a large rural population have contributed to several environmental issues in the DRC. Mining—whether by individuals or corporations—contributes to soil erosion and generates toxic byproducts, thereby poisoning the DRC's water supply. Rural populations contribute to deforestation by relying extensively on wood fuel (see p2 of *Technology and Material*) and practicing slash-and-burn agriculture.

Government

Since its current constitution took effect in February 2006, the DRC has been a semi-presidential republic structured similarly to the French government. The DRC was originally divided into 10 provinces and 1 ***ville*** (city)—the national capital region of Kinshasa.

In an effort to protect the DRC's natural resource revenue from government embezzlers, the framers of the 2006 constitution introduced provisions designed to limit the national government's power. Those provisions were not implemented. Then, in January of 2015, the National Assembly passed a law creating 26 provinces from the original 10.

Executive Branch

The President, currently Felix Tshisekedi, functions as head-of-state and commander-in-chief of the armed forces. As of 2016, the President is elected by direct popular vote to serve a 5-year term, which can be renewed once. The President also appoints a Prime Minister, currently Judith Suminwa Tuluka, who must be approved by the National Assembly. The Prime Minister serves as head-of-government and selects a Cabinet of ministers, which must also be approved by the National Assembly.

Legislative Branch

The DRC has 2 legislative chambers: the National Assembly (NA) and the Senate. The former comprises 500 directly-elected National Deputies, while the latter consists of 109 Senators, 108 of which are selected by provincial assemblies. Members of both chambers serve 5-year terms with no term limits. The President has the power to dissolve the National Assembly if it persistently disagrees with either the Prime Minister or Cabinet.

Judicial Branch

Since the DRC was colonized by Belgians (see p4 of *History and Myth*), the country's legal system is based on Belgian civil law, which in turn is derived from France's Napoleonic Code. The constitution also recognizes customary law, which consists of the traditional, locally-based legal practices of the indigenous population. Although customary law is subordinate to statutory law, Congolese use the former system to settle most cases.

Political Climate

In 2006 and 2011, the Congolese people voted in the country's first multi-party elections since 1966. Participation was strong: in 2011, for example, about 60% of voters turned out to choose between 11 presidential candidates and nearly 19,000 candidates for the National Assembly (NA). Despite these promising signs and an absence of widespread election-related violence, technical and logistical issues and reports of intimidation raised questions about the results.

According to the official tally, President Kabila won re-election in 2011 with 49% of the vote, while his party, the People's Party for Reconstruction and Democracy (PPRD), and its allies won 260 of 500 seats (52%) in the NA. Kabila faced criticism during the election over his government's decision to end runoff voting, which occurs when no presidential candidate receives more than 50% of the vote. With Kabila ineligible for re-election in 2018, the Union for Democracy and Social Progress (UDPS) candidate, Felix Tshisekedi, won the 2018 election. In 2023, he won again with 73% of the vote. The UDPS currently holds 41 seats in the NA and 15 in the Senate, while the PPRD now holds 62 seats in the NA and no seats in the Senate.

Defense

The Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (known by its French initials FARDC) consist of an Army, Navy, and Air Force having a collective strength of roughly 134,250 personnel including central staffs. Due mainly to low pay, poor training, and low morale, the FARDC historically has performed poorly. Consequently, the Congolese government depended upon allied foreign militaries for its defense during the Second Congo War (see p10 of *History and Myth*) and still depends upon the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) for stability operations in the East. The FARDC is currently undergoing a slow restructuring as its leaders try to integrate some of those who fought for rebel groups during the Second Congo War. FARDC soldiers are accused regularly of committing human rights abuses (see p2 of *Sex and Gender*).

Army: Consisting of around 103,000 personnel, the Army is the largest branch of the FARDC. It is poorly equipped for a force its size, having about 174 main battle tanks, 40 light tanks, and 164 armored personnel carriers. FARDC personnel commonly use their positions to extract bribes from Congolese citizens, a practice likely motivated by meager pay. The only FARDC unit that is paid and equipped well is the Republican Guard, an elite unit of 8,000 that protects the President.

Navy: Comprising approximately 6,700 personnel, the Navy is responsible for patrolling the DRC's inland waterways and 23-mi coastline. The Navy is equipped with one Type-062 (PRC Shanghai II) gunboat in addition to small patrol boats. The Navy generally has been ineffective, particularly in its coastal defense mission.

Air Force: The Air Force comprises about 2,550 personnel. It is equipped with around 4 attack aircraft, 4 transport craft, 6 attack helicopters, and 10 transport helicopters. Most of the Air Force's hardware is of Soviet/Russian design.

Air Force of the DR Congo
Rank Insignia

General

Lieutenant General

Major General

Brigadier General

Colonel

Lieutenant Colonel

Major

Captain

Lieutenant

Sub Lieutenant

Chief Warrant Officer

Warrant Officer Class I

Warrant Officer Class II

Sergeant Major First Class

Sergeant Major

Sergeant First Class

Sergeant

Corporal

Private First Class

Security Issues

Although the DRC's security situation has improved since the end of the Second Congo War (see p10 of *History and Myth*), various rebel groups continue to commit terrorist acts and human rights violations in the eastern DRC, especially in the Nord Kivu, Sud Kivu, and Orientale provinces.

FDLR: The Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR in French) is an ethnically Hutu rebel group based in the DRC. According to a 2023 United Nations (UN) report, the FDLR is eastern DRC's strongest and most politically influential rebel group. Most FDLR fighters once belonged to one of the two groups primarily responsible for committing the 1994 Rwandan Genocide (see p9 of *History and Myth*): the old (pre-1994) Rwandan Armed Forces, and the Interahamwe, a Hutu militia.

The FDLR's stated aim is to replace the Tutsi-aligned Rwandan government. The group fought the elder Kabila and his Tutsi allies in the First Congo War but backed him in the Second Congo War after being abandoned by his Tutsi allies. Although regional militaries have had some success in fighting the FDLR, it is far from destroyed. Estimates indicate that the FDLR has 5,000 fighters.

CNDP and M23: The National Congress for the Defense of the People (CNDP in French) was established as a political party by its ethnic Tutsi leader General Laurent Nkunda in 2006. Rebelling against the Kabila government soon after its formation, the CNDP eventually was defeated and offered a peace deal in 2009 when Rwandan forces arrested Nkunda. In April 2012, about 300 former CNDP members who had been incorporated into the FARDC mutinied under General Bosco Ntaganda. Now called the M23 movement, the mutineers captured Goma in November 2012 before retreating under international pressure. In March 2013, Ntaganda turned himself in at the US embassy in Rwanda. In 2017, insurgency resumed and, in October 2022, the group launched its latest offensive in the east of DRC which forced thousands to flee.

Mai Mai: "Mai Mai" is a term describing Congolese ethnic militia groups ostensibly existing to protect the homeland and expel foreign forces, particularly Rwandan forces and their M23 and CNDP allies. The Mai Mai backed the Kabila government during the Second Congo War (see p10 of *History and Myth*), aligning closely with the Interahamwe and other Hutu groups.

ADF: The Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) is a Ugandan rebel organization consisting of Islamic extremists and troops from a variety of defunct regional militias. In the late 1990s, the ADF conducted a series of attacks—mostly against civilians—in southwestern Uganda, prompting Ugandan military action that pushed some ADF activity into the eastern DRC. In November 2021, the FARDC and Uganda People's Defence Force launched a joint offensive. However, the offensive failed and the group's attacks increased. Since April 2022, ADF attacks have killed at least 430 civilians.

LRA: The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) is a rebel group that seeks to replace the Ugandan government with one presumably based on the Bible's 10 Commandments. The LRA is known for its brutal acts of assault, murder, rape, and disfigurement and also for its extensive reliance on kidnapped children to serve as sex slaves and soldiers. The International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants in 2005 for LRA leader Joseph Kony and 4 of his commanders. This event, along with a deterioration of LRA strength after years of pursuit by the Ugandan military, led the LRA to end its permanent presence in Uganda and relocate some operations to the DRC. Today, the LRA is most prominent in the CAR.

Following the LRA's relocation, the DRC, Uganda, and other countries have staged successful offensives to weaken the group. With many LRA leaders still at large, LRA remnants continue to commit brutal attacks in the northeastern DRC. In 2022, the LRA reportedly consisted of roughly 1,000 members. The Congolese military has worked with MONUSCO in recent years to locate remaining LRA fighters.

Foreign Relations

With the exceptions of Angola, Rwanda, and Uganda, the DRC has relatively cordial relations with neighboring countries. For example, the DRC and Zambia have solidified a trading partnership, while Tanzania has facilitated peace in the DRC by harboring as many as 89,260 Congolese refugees.

Although Angola and the DRC share historical, economic, and ethnic ties, relations between the two countries are complicated by Angola's suspected poor treatment of Congolese workers and disputes over control of offshore oil fields. The neighbors also have fought concurrent civil wars in recent years and intervened in each other's conflicts.

Relations between the DRC and its smaller neighbors Rwanda and Uganda have been strained in recent years by the latter two countries' interventions in the eastern DRC. Both Rwanda and Uganda have backed various rebel groups in the eastern DRC (see *History and Myth*, p9-10) and are widely believed to have illegally exported large quantities of minerals such as gold and coltan (see p3 of *Economics and Resources*) from the DRC. Ties have improved in recent years as the DRC has invited the militaries of both countries to help pursue rebel groups in the DRC.

DRC-US Relations: Since Mobutu was anti-communist, the US and the DRC (then Zaire) were allies for most of his time in power (see p8-9 of *History and Myth*). As the Cold War ended, the US distanced itself from Mobutu, repelled by his record of raiding state coffers and violating human rights. The US initially had positive ties with the elder Kabila, although relations soured after he ended his alliance with Rwanda (see p9-10 of *History and Myth*). Since Joseph Kabila acquired power in 2001, the US and the DRC have worked together to improve the DRC's economy and restore stability to the country. To help with these aims, the US provides the DRC with a large amount of official development assistance (ODA) (see p4 of *Economics and Resources*), including $835.6 million in aid during 2022 alone.

Ethnic Groups

Several hundred different ethnic groups inhabit the DRC. The largest are the Kongo, Mongo, Luba, and Azande. Most Congolese ethnic groups speak Bantu languages (see p3 of *Language and Communication*).

Although ethnic favoritism occurs in the DRC, it typically does not have disastrous political consequences because no group constitutes a majority. Moreover, modernization in recent years has obscured many of the traits that once differentiated ethnic groups. Consequently, Congolese tend to identify more closely with their villages and families than with their ethnic groups.

Kongo: Constituting about 15% of the population, the Kongo mostly inhabit Kongo Central Province in the western DRC. They are heirs to a coastal kingdom that made first contact with Portuguese explorers in the late 1400s (see p2-3 of *History and Myth*). Perhaps due partly to a long history of engagement with the West, many Kongo are educated urban office workers.

Luba: This group comprises about 15% of the population, living mainly in northern Katanga Province and the Kasai provinces of the southern DRC. Historically hunters and farmers, the Luba are known also for their skill in pottery, woodwork, and metalwork (see p5 of *Aesthetics and Recreation*). In recent decades, divisions between Luba from Kasai and Katanga have led to violence and political conflict.

Mongo: Also called the Ngundu, they comprise about 15% of the populace, living in the Equateur and Bandundu provinces of the central DRC. Originally hunter-gatherers, the Mongo are now known for banana cultivation, animal trapping, and a variety of handicrafts (see p5 of *Aesthetics and Recreation*).

Azande: Speaking a non-Bantu language, the Azande live mostly in the northern DRC's Orientale Province and total about 5% of the population. Although they historically have lived as hunters and subsistence farmers, today they also cultivate cash crops (see p2 of *Economics and Resources*).

Other Groups: Nilotic-speaking ethnic groups, of which the largest is the Alur, live in the northeastern DRC on the border with South Sudan. Pygmies, known for their short stature and hunting skills, live throughout the Congo Basin. The best known Pygmy groups in the DRC are probably the Babinga, Bambuti, and Twa. Banyamulenge, or Congolese Tutsi, live in the eastern DRC near the Rwandan and Burundian borders. There are a small number of Western foreign nationals living in the capital, and a sizeable community of Indian, Lebanese, and West African merchants.

Social Relations

In most Congolese ethnic groups, age and gender traditionally have been the notable social status indicators. Respected as the wisest members of the community, elders are expected to offer advice and help mediate disputes. Rural Congolese in particular treat elders with great respect and consider it an honor to care for elderly relatives. Men remain the dominant gender in rural areas, having greater legal rights than most women (see p1 of *Sex and Gender*).

In urban areas, by contrast, the prevalence of imported goods has made monetary wealth the primary social status indicator. Along with wealth, education is also important. There are 3 main social classes in the urban DRC. The top class consists of a small number of wealthy officials and businessmen. They typically live in luxurious urban homes, use imported Western products, have access to education and healthcare, and can buy their release from legal liability.

The next class consists of clerks, civil servants, small business owners, traders, and others with a regular income. While government employees earn modest salaries, payments are often late and taxed heavily. Other members of this class also face high taxes and economic uncertainty. The lowest class consists of workers in the informal economy, who solicit income from wherever they can. They mostly live in shantytowns and often cannot afford even basic necessities.

3. RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

Overview

Most Congolese are Christian. About 95.8% of the population is either Roman Catholic, Protestant, and or members of the indigenous, Christianity-based Kimbanguist Church (see "Kimbanguism" below). Muslims constitute over 1% of the Congolese population, while another 1% practices traditional religions exclusively. Followers of other faiths include Greek Orthodox Christians, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and a small number of Jews. Nearly 2% are unaffiliated with any denomination.

Traditional Beliefs

Before their exposure to Islam or Christianity, most Congolese lived within a traditional belief system consisting of 3 spiritual influences: natural, ancestral, and divine. As animists, many Congolese believed that the spirit of life or consciousness lives in all objects, animate and inanimate, and that all natural objects, such as trees and animals, are sacred. This conviction established a close link between people and their environment. Many Congolese also believed that the spirits of their ancestors participated in daily life by guiding or obstructing human affairs.

Many Congolese ethnic groups also recognized the existence of a supreme being, a creator god who was good, merciful, and unknowable. For example, members of the Kongo ethnic group believed in ***Nzambi Mpungu***, a god who created the world and its inhabitants. Although still responsible for day-to-day events like weather and peoples' health, ***Nzambi Mpungu*** lost interest in the world after he created it. Consequently, the Kongo direct rituals at other spiritual entities, such as nature or ancestral spirits, in an effort to influence daily events.

Among some groups, spiritual values and religious practices influenced social and political systems. The Luba ethnic group, for example, believed that religious activities were meant to engender dignity, self-respect, and good-heartedness among participants and the whole society. In addition, the ***mulopwe*** (Luba King) and his council of elders tried to govern in accordance with the will of ancestral spirits, which they learned with the help of the ***mulopwe***'s supernatural powers.

Congolese historically communicated with the spirit world using a variety of means such as prayers, songs, dances, offerings, sacrifices, libations, cleansing rituals, and rites of passage. These activities often involved creating and using special furniture, buildings, figurines, statues, and masks. For example, the Kongo ethnic group made ***minikisi***—usually a clay pot, decorated shell, or hollow gourd—to hold ancestral relics. ***Minikisi*** were popular during the colonial era (see p4 of *History and Myth*), when people used them in rituals meant to deter abuse from authorities.

Although most Congolese are now practicing Christians, many also continue to observe traditional religions. Even as an active Catholic, President Mobutu used many traditional religious symbols to bolster his authority. It was rumored that his walking cane could turn into a snake.

Introduction of Christianity

Roman Catholicism was introduced to the DRC at the end of the 1400s, when Portuguese explorers arrived in the Kongo Kingdom (see p2-3 of *History and Myth*). The King of Kongo became one of the region's earliest converts, taking the name Alfonso I and establishing a trade partnership with the Portuguese. Over the next 50 years, several Kongo traveled to Portugal to study the language and religion, while Portuguese missionaries traveled throughout the Kongo Kingdom, founding a series of small churches in the places they went. These missionaries had largely left the region by 1615, while those still remaining departed in the late 18th century as the Kongo Kingdom dissolved.

Introduction of Islam

Arab traders from the Indian Ocean island of Zanzibar brought Islam to the DRC while seeking slaves in central Africa during the 1700s and 1800s (see p3 of *History and Myth*). Eventually, small Muslim communities formed in the eastern DRC. Although some Muslims from Sudan, Uganda, and Tanzania later joined these communities, Islam never predominated in the DRC.

Religion in the Congo Free State

Organized missionary activity in the region resumed in the late 19th century as European interest in the Congo River Basin reawakened. Both Protestant and Catholic missionary activity increased as Belgium's King Leopold II formed the Congo Free State in 1885 (see p4-5 of *History and Myth*).

Missionaries—including French Catholics and Protestants from Britain, Sweden, and the US—initially supported Leopold's plans. They appreciated his anti-slavery stance and apparent desire to establish missions, schools, and health clinics in the region. As the concession companies' brutal forced labor practices were brought to light, many missionaries (particularly Protestants) vocally protested, ultimately leading to the dissolution of the Congo Free State and the creation of Belgian Congo, which was controlled by the Belgian government rather than Leopold.

Religion in Belgian Congo

During the Belgian Congo era, missionaries supported the Belgian government's "civilizing mission" because they considered the Congolese as degraded and uncivilized (see p6 of *History and Myth*). While missionaries opened schools and created written forms of many indigenous tongues, they also tended to dismiss local beliefs and practices, encouraging converts to adopt Western-style customs. By independence there were 7,500 missionaries, of which 6,000 were Catholic and 400 native Congolese priests.

After Independence: Religion in Mobutu's Zaire

Although President Mobutu was a staunch Catholic, he viewed religious institutions as a threat to his authority and actively attempted to reduce their power. For example, he banned religious youth groups and outlawed religious broadcasts on radio and TV. Instead, the government and the state-controlled media encouraged adulation of Mobutu himself as part of the President's "Authenticity" movement (see p8 of *History and Myth*). They spoke of Mobutu as a heaven-sent prophet or messiah**,** encouraging Congolese to replace their Christian crucifixes with pictures of Mobutu.

Catholic leaders denounced both Mobutu and his "Authenticity" movement. In a series of pastoral letters, they condemned the President's human rights violations, prompting Mobutu to expel several Catholic bishops. During the same period, Protestant churches expanded their political clout by merging to form the Church of Christ in Zaire, which lobbied for democratic reform. Through these types of actions, Congolese religious institutions acted as the conscience of the nation during a very turbulent period (see p9 *History and Myth*).

Religion Today

Today religious institutions are a stabilizing presence in Congolese society, where religion remains an important part of life for a majority of Congolese. In a recent survey, 82% of respondents reported that religion is very important in their lives, while 70% claimed regular attendance at weekly religious services.

Many Christian churches continue to offer educational services from pre-primary through post-secondary levels (see *Learning and Knowledge*). In addition, they finance a wide array of social support ventures, including medical clinics, housing projects, and agricultural development schemes. Religious leaders at all levels continue to protest the ongoing human rights violations that plague the DRC (see p7-8 *Political and Social Relations*).

While the well-established Roman Catholic Church and mainstream Protestant churches dominate the DRC's religious landscape, other types of Christian churches have emerged in recent decades. Music, dance, and other traditional African elements often infuse all types of Christian worship services.

Roman Catholicism

Encompassing about half the population, Catholics inhabit all parts of the DRC. Since independence, a number of sects have tried to combine Catholic teachings with indigenous traditions and beliefs. For example, the ***Jamaa*** movement focused on fertility and the sacredness of life with the goal of forming an emotional connection with God. Although the Vatican initially resisted the movement, today it recognizes ***Jamaa*** followers as members of the Roman Catholic Church.

Protestantism

Most of the DRC's Protestant denominations work together as the Church of Christ in Congo (*Église du Christ au Congo* or ECC), an organization that traces its history to the early 1900s. At that time, Protestant missionaries from Britain, Sweden, and the US wanted to avoid competition between their respective denominations, so they banded together and formed a single organization. Today, many Congolese Protestants do not identify with particular denominations, instead referring to themselves as members of the ECC or "The Protestant Church." As in many African countries, Evangelical Protestant churches have grown rapidly in the DRC in recent years.

Independent African Churches

Although Independent African churches take several different forms, most of them trace their founding to charismatic leaders who opposed colonial administrators and broke away from mainstream Protestant mission churches. In the DRC, the most popular such leader was Simon Kimbangu.

Kimbanguism: In response to visions telling him to become a healer and apostle, Baptist Church member Simon Kimbangu began his ministry in 1921. After leading a protest against the Belgians, Kimbangu was caught and imprisoned. He continued his ministry from prison, proclaiming that Jesus Christ had sent him to start a new church based on Christianity and traditional beliefs. Although Kimbangu died in prison in 1951 and the Belgians banned his movement, he became a martyr for many people and a symbol of Congolese nationalism. Even Mobutu held the Kimbanguist Church in high regard due to its synthesis of Africanization and Christianity.

Recognized in 1959 as an official religious group, the Kimbanguist Church was later admitted to the World Council of Churches as its first Independent African church. Also called the Church of Christ on Earth by the Prophet Simon Kimbangu, the church today has 5-7 million Congolese members, primarily among the Kongo who live in Kinshasa and Bas-Congo Province.

Islam

Estimates of the DRC's Muslim population range from 830,000 to 8 million. Most Muslims live in Kinshasa or in the eastern provinces of Maniema and Orientale. Like 85% of the world's Muslims, about 94% of Congolese Muslims identify with the Sunni sect. Another 5% identify with the Shi'a sect, while less than 1% claim no sectarian affiliation.

Traditional Beliefs

A traditional worldview continues to infuse daily life for many Congolese, even those who identify as Christian or Muslim. While only a few take part in traditional ceremonies honoring ancestors, many Congolese still believe that spirits or magical powers reside in various objects and influence daily life. For example, a student might carry an amulet or talisman for luck when taking an examination, while a politician might accuse an opponent of appealing to evil spirits in a bid to gain votes.

Many Congolese blame death, sickness, accidents, or bad luck on the purposeful and malevolent work of witches or sorcerers. In a recent survey, approximately 60% of Congolese reported believing that certain people can cast spells and curses.

If they feel that witchcraft, sorcery, or other supernatural forces are being used against them, Congolese may take measures to protect themselves. Alternatively, they may consult an ***nganga*** (diviner) to identify the source of the malevolent force and then perform an exorcism. Since Congolese believe that children have especially close ties to the spirit world, they sometimes accuse children of communicating with evil spirits when bad luck befalls their families.

Sorcery and Witchcraft Accusations

Both the United Nations (UN) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) report that both adults and children are occasionally accused of performing sorcery or witchcraft. As a consequently, they are beaten, burned, tortured, driven from their homes, or even killed. Many of those labeled "witches" are in fact suffering from disabilities, speech impediments, or psychological problems or developmental delays. NGOs estimate that about 70% of Kinshasa's 70,000 street children (see p2 of *Family and Kinship*) are accused witches abandoned by their parents. While witchcraft accusation and child abandonment are both illegal, Congolese authorities do not typically prosecute such cases.

Sorcery and witchcraft accusations typically cause general fear and unrest within communities. Some non-denominational churches charge excessive fees to conduct exorcisms on accused witches, including children. These exorcisms typically involve beating, starvation, and forced ingestion of purgatives.

4. FAMILY AND KINSHIP

Overview

The family is the basic unit in DRC society. Congolese are loyal to their families and will not hesitate to provide for its members in need of food, lodging, or financial support. Due to years of conflict (see p7-10 of *History and Myth*), however, family ties for some Congolese have weakened or disintegrated.

Family Structure

For most Congolese, family refers not just to the nuclear family, which includes two parents and their children, but also the extended family, comprised of several generations of aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents. In many cases, members of the same extended family coexist and share responsibilities such as farming, child-rearing, and other tasks.

DRC is mostly a patriarchal and patrilineal society where men have most decision-making authority and lineage is traced through male ancestors. Ethnic groups in the western DRC tend to be matrilineal, whereby lineage is traced through female descent. Since the Kongo ethnic group (see p10 of *Political and Social Relations*), for example, is matrilineal, their children often are influenced more by their maternal uncles than by their paternal relatives.

Polygyny: This term refers to the practice of a man having multiple wives simultaneously. While polygyny is common in rural parts of the DRC, polygynous marriages are illegal and not recognized by the government. Instead, polygynous relationships typically occur in the context of ***deuxieme bureau*** (“second office” in French), a practice whereby married men keep mistresses on either a short- or long-term basis and sometimes treat them as wives. Although polygyny traditionally was popular because it signified affluence and high social status, the practice has declined due to the influence of Christianity (see p2 of *Religion and Spirituality*) and Western media.

Children: Children signify wealth in the DRC and are considered a blessing from God. Consequently, Congolese women bear large numbers of children—an average of 10 in rural areas and about half that number in the country as a whole. Children are expected to behave respectfully toward all adults, especially elders (see p11 of *Political and Social Relations*,) and are taught to start performing chores—such as tending to animals and crops, pulling weeds, and hanging laundry to dry—as soon as they can walk.

Although parents are primarily responsible for raising their own children, it is the duty of every village resident to discipline and look after children in the community. Nevertheless, child abuse and neglect are major issues in the DRC. Many children have been orphaned due to warfare or abandoned due to economic hardship, suspicion of witchcraft (see p7 of *Religion and Spirituality*), or mental and physical disabilities—these cases of child neglect have been condemned in and outside the DRC. Moreover, combatants of many different affiliations have lured or coerced children into serving as soldiers in all of the DRC's conflicts since the 1960s (see p7-10 of *History and Myth*).

Residence

Although the DRC is urbanizing rapidly, most Congolese still live in villages. Housing structures in both villages and cities vary by ethnic group, region, and economic status.

Rural: Most homes in the DRC's savannas are one-room, mud-brick huts with frames built from sticks, vines, and palm fronds. This type of home typically has a thatched grass roof and is either round or rectangular. Rainforest homes are similar to those found in grasslands but usually have wood frames. Huts often are grouped into compounds in which each hut has a specific use, such as cooking or sleeping. Some compounds also feature small gardens consisting of subsistence crops for family consumption. Although large villages sometimes occupy as many as 200 huts, even the largest villages typically lack electricity and running water.

Urban: Most of the DRC's urban poor live in shantytowns, where homes typically are crafted from corrugated iron and other readily available materials. Factory and office workers, who typically are more affluent than inhabitants of shantytowns, usually live in tall, cinder-block apartment buildings. In both types of home, electricity and water tend to be unreliable if available at all. Wealthy urban dwellers often live in large dwellings with modern amenities in neighborhoods that formerly housed Europeans during the colonial era (see p4 of *History and Myth*).

Rites of Passage

Rites of passage are ceremonies recognizing life's transitions and typically differ by ethic group.

Birth

Congolese still observe some of the traditional practices that have historically been associated with pregnancy and birth. For example, pregnant women typically do not leave their homes in order to avoid being cursed (see p1-2 & 6-7 of *Religion and Spirituality*). In addition, Congolese continue to celebrate a new birth in the parents' home.

Initiation Rituals

Congolese traditionally used initiation rituals to mark children's entrance into adulthood and prepare them for new social roles. At puberty, young Congolese traditionally left their homes for days or months in order to attend gender-specific "bush schools." Boys were circumcised and learned how to hunt, make masks, and dance, while girls learned domestic skills such as cooking and cleaning. Both genders received instruction about sexual relations and were celebrated as adults upon returning to their villages. Today, young Congolese often learn about sex from an aunt or uncle.

Marriage

Congolese traditionally have regarded marriage not only as the joining of two individuals but also as a union of two families and the continuation of a community.

Spouse Selection: Although extended family members once arranged most marriages for their children, today, this practice is less common in villages all but nonexistent in cities. Instead, young Congolese increasingly find spouses through dating and social settings such as school, church, dances, parties, and concerts.

Bridewealth: Bridewealth is a pre-marital payment that the groom's family gives to the bride's as compensation for the loss of the bride's presence and the value of her labor. Although bridewealth sometimes is paid in cash, it can also be disbursed in cattle, goats, tools, or other assets.

Weddings: A typical Congolese wedding may include up to 3 different ceremonies that follow the negotiation and exchange of bridewealth. First, a couple usually obtains a civil marriage certificate and then holds a small celebration with friends and relatives at one of their families' homes. Next, a couple typically has a traditional marriage ceremony. Although grooms dress in Western clothing for this ceremony, brides wear the traditional ***liputa*** (long dress or skirt, see *Aesthetics and Recreation*, p1). Finally, couples raised in Christian households (see *Religion and Spirituality*) may hold a third ceremony in a Christian church, followed by another celebration.

Death

Most Congolese believe that the souls of deceased endure as ancestral spirits who routinely intervene in the affairs of living relatives (see p1 of *Religion and Spirituality*). Consequently, Congolese of most faiths consider it essential to please the deceased by performing various burial rituals. The deceased is first washed, groomed, and covered in a shroud and then displayed for friends and relatives to view. At the burial site, family members may place gifts in the grave or offer a few remarks. After the burial rituals are complete, the family of the deceased may stay together for a week or longer.

5. SEX AND GENDER

Overview

Congolese typically consider sexual relations a private matter closed to public discussion even though Congolese women remain victims of ruthless sexual violence from armed groups (see p7-8 of *Political and Social Relations*). They also face widespread and socially accepted discrimination and domestic violence. While some discriminatory policies and attitudes are traditional, others are linked directly to the violence and disorder that has become commonplace in eastern DRC.

Gender Roles and Work

Men and women traditionally have assumed distinctive roles and responsibilities, each regarded with equal esteem until the colonial era. In rural areas, men historically traded and hunted, while women gathered firewood, collected water, cultivated crops, cooked, tended to the household, and cared for children. Today, women in both urban and rural areas still care for children and kin and perform most domestic chores, while women in rural areas may also cultivate crops. Many Congolese women also earn money outside the home, selling goods at market or running service businesses such as hair salons. Since women must have spousal consent to obtain business permits, many work in the unregulated informal economy. Women who perform wage labor typically earn less than male counterparts.

Gender and the Law

Although the DRC's constitution grants equal rights to men and women, those rights are not protected equally and often undermined by tradition or discriminatory laws introduced during the colonial era. For example, the DRC's Family Code designates men as heads of household whom wives are required to obey. Moreover, women must have their husbands' permission before signing any legal document. Consequently, men can easily prevent their wives from obtaining a passport, opening a bank account, or acquiring property.

Discriminatory attitudes often prevail even in situations in which both the constitution and specific laws support gender equality. For example, while women legally may own and inherit land, widows are commonly forced to surrender their inheritance to a male relative due to the continuing influence of customary law (see p4 of *Political and Social Relations*).

Gender and Politics

While Congolese political parties are required by law to include women as candidates for political office, there is no mechanism for enforcing this requirement, resulting in low female political participation. As of mid-2024, women held just 14% of the seats in the National Assembly, 16% of Senate posts, and 31% of ministerial posts. This low participations stems from a number of factors including limited formal education for women, fear of retaliation from discriminatory men, and a Family Code interpretation that women must have spousal permission to participate in politics.

Gender Based Violence (GBV)

Rebel, government, and militia troops alike routinely use GBV, particularly rape, as a weapon of war against inhabitants of the eastern DRC (see p7-8 of *Political and Social Relations*). GBV is also widespread beyond the DRC's conflict zones.

Perpetrators rarely face legal consequences for GBV, while most victims do not have access to medical treatment (see p3 of *Sustenance and Health*). In 2006, the Congolese government revised the penal code in order to increase prosecution rates and provide more support to rape victims. Nevertheless, the situation remains about the same, especially since many victims do not report rape in order to avoid the social stigma associated with being a victim of sexual violence.

In addition to rape, domestic violence is common in the DRC. In a recent survey, about 51% of Congolese women reported having experienced physical or sexual violence during their

lifetime. Abused women have limited legal recourse, as the DRC's laws recognize neither domestic abuse nor spousal rape as offenses. In addition, a number of Congolese—including 34% of women—indicated in a recent poll that men are usually justified in hitting their wives. With few alternatives, most women reconcile with abusive spouses.

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

FGM refers to the practice of modifying the female sex organ in order to reduce sexual pleasure and encourage virginity. Common in many parts of Africa but relatively rare in the DRC, FGM occurs among a few groups in the DRC's North.

Sex and Procreation

Congolese women typically bear many children (see p2 of *Family and Kinship*), and while most of them are familiar with contraceptives, only about 28% of women use or have access to them. With rape widespread and healthcare limited, for many Congolese women, birth control is not a matter of choice. Abortion is legal in the DRC only in cases where the pregnancy compromises the mother's mental or physical health.

Since virginity and fidelity are considered more applicable to women than men, the DRC has laws designed to discourage women from having extramarital sex. For example, women who commit adultery face criminal penalties regardless of the circumstance, while men face punishment only for committing adultery of "injurious quality."

Homosexuality

Homosexuality is legal but socially unacceptable in the DRC. While there have been no reports of systematic discrimination against homosexuals, they often face abuse or discrimination from their families or communities. Consequently, Congolese homosexuals typically hide their sexual orientation. In 2010, the National Assembly debated a bill that would have criminalized homosexual acts and banned media representations promoting homosexuality. Despite popular support, the bill did not pass.

6. LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

Language Overview

More than 200 languages and dialects are spoken in the DRC, none of which is the first language for a majority of the population. While French is the official language, there are 4 indigenous "national" languages used for primary education (see p4 of *Learning and Knowledge*) and to promote cultural identity. Many Congolese are multilingual, speaking French at work and school, 1 of the 4 national languages in the marketplace, and a local language at home.

French

Belgian colonists introduced French to the Congo region in the 19th century, where today it remains the primary language of government, business, and secondary/tertiary education (see p4 of *Learning and Knowledge*). Only about 43% of Congolese speak French, mainly the educated and wealthy urban-dwellers. For some Congolese, speaking French often connotes formality and sophistication, while for others, French is still regarded as the language of the colonial oppressor.

National Languages

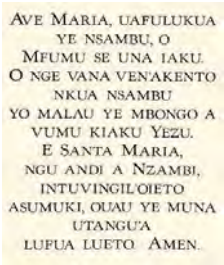
The DRC's 4 national languages—Lingala, Tshiluba, Kikongo, and Kiswahili—belong to the Bantu branch of the Niger-Congo language family. Each language is associated with a particular region where it serves as the dominant language of everyday communication, business, trade, primary education, and TV and radio broadcasting (see p3 of *Technology and Material*).

Lingala: It is the predominant language in Kinshasa (the capital of the DRC), Equateur Province, and northern Bandundu and Orientale provinces and the DRC's most widely spoken national language. More than 20 million Congolese speak Lingala as a first language and another 20 million as a second language.

Although its exact origins are unclear, Lingala probably evolved as a pidgin language along the banks of the southern Congo River in the 1700s. Missionaries and colonial authorities used Lingala to communicate with locals in the Congo Free State, where it later became the language of the Force Publique, a colonial police force (see p5 of *History and Myth*). After independence Lingala became the language of the Congolese military and a favorite of Patrice Lumumba and Mobutu Sese Seko (see p7-8 of *History and Myth*). Today Lingala's rich and diverse history is evident in the phrases it borrows from French, Portuguese, and other indigenous languages.

Tshiluba: Also known as the Luba-Kasai language, Tshiluba is spoken by about 7 million Congolese, primarily members of the Luba ethnic group in the Kasai-Occidental and Kasai-Orientale provinces. Tshiluba is related to the language that was spoken in the DRC's pre-colonial Luba Kingdom (see p2 of *History and Myth*) and was one of the first languages translated and transcribed by Christian missionaries.

Kikongo: As the first language of about 3 million people in Bas-Congo Province and southern Bandundu Province, another 5 million Congolese speak Kikongo as a second language. It traces its roots to the Kongo Kingdom, whose inhabitants became some of the first in sub-Saharan Africa to make contact with Europeans in the 15th century (see p2 of *History and Myth*). Due to this early contact, Kikongo was the first Bantu language to be written.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YE NSAMBU, O
MFUMU SE UNA IAKU.
O NGE VANA VEN'AKENTO
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YO MALAU YE MBONGO A
VUMU KIAKU YEZU.
E SANTA MARIA,
NGU ANDI A NZAMBI,
INTUVINGILOIETO
ASUMUKI, OUAU YE MUNA
UTANGU'A
LUFUA LUETO AMEN.

Kiswahili: Although Kiswahili (also called "Swahili") is spoken as a first language by only about 2 million Congolese, it is used commonly as a second language in the eastern and southern DRC. Brought to the region from Africa's Indian Ocean coast by Arab traders in the late 1800s, Kiswahili borrows elements of Arabic, French, and various Bantu languages. Members of several Congolese ethnic groups speak Kiswahili or one of its 15 dialects as a second language.

Other Indigenous Language

Some Congolese who live near the Rwandan border in the eastern DRC's Kivu provinces speak Kinyarwanda, a Bantu language that is the national language of Rwanda. Although most languages spoken in the DRC are Bantu languages, several other language families are represented. For example, some inhabitants of Orientale Province speak Nilo-Saharan languages, while others from the western DRC speak Kituba, a creole language based on Kikongo.

English

English is a compulsory subject at the secondary and tertiary levels (see p4 of *Learning and Knowledge*), although not spoken widely. Nevertheless, the presence of MONUSCO, a United Nations peacekeeping mission, has promoted the use of English indirectly (see p5 of *Political and Social Relations*).

Communication Overview

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

Communication Style

Congolese tend to be passionate and animated speakers, sometimes using exaggerated body language. In most cases, they are courteous, friendly, and respectful to both peers and superiors alike. Although Congolese are naturally frank and open, their country's history of conflict and political instability (see p7-10 of *History and Myth* & p7-8 of *Political and Social Relations*) influences their willingness to trust anyone beyond their own networks of friends and relatives.

Congolese sometimes make requests or accept help without saying “please” or “thank you.” Although this behavior may seem rude, it is actually a simple consequence of the fact that many Congolese languages do not have equivalent expressions. For speakers of those languages, the social norm is to show thanks through actions rather than words, and many Congolese still follow those norms even when speaking English or French.

Greetings

Exchanging proper greetings is an important part of Congolese culture, which involves inquiring about the well-being of family and friends. Consequently, foreign nationals are advised not to rush through greetings, but rather, take time to get acquainted.

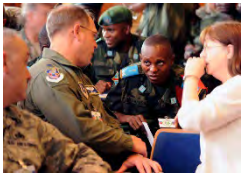
In cities men and women typically greet each other by shaking hands, sometimes while grasping each other’s right upper arms. They also exchange verbal pleasantries. Close friends may shake hands and then hug or even exchange 3 cheek kisses. In rural areas women may avoid shaking hands with men, instead clapping their hands softly or offer a slight bow. When meeting a group, a Congolese typically shakes hands with every person.

Verbal greetings vary depending on the language or situation. The French “***Bonjour***” and the Lingala “***Mbote***” are common greetings in formal and urban contexts. Due to the DRC’s linguistic diversity, it is not always entirely clear which language Congolese will use to communicate. When meeting a person for the first time, educated Congolese tend to begin conversations in French, transitioning to a shared language if one exits.

Forms of Address

When addressing people in formal contexts, Congolese usually use a title such as Mr. or Dr. along with a surname. When they do not know the appropriate surname, Congolese sometimes address others using a combination of a title and occupation. For example, a Congolese might address someone as “Mr. Teacher” or “Mrs. Engineer.”

Nicknames are common among Congolese but should only be used with permission. Children tend to refer to elders as “aunt” or “uncle” regardless of the actual relationship. In business contexts, Congolese prefer the formal French “you” (***vous***) to the informal “you” (***tu***), although colleagues and peers may address each other by first names.



Conversation Topics

Congolese view ethnicity, politics, war, and poverty as sensitive subjects. Consequently, foreign nationals are advised to avoid these topics. If a Congolese introduces a sensitive topic, foreign nationals should not become involved in a debate of disagreement. When a Congolese is uncomfortable with a specific question, he may remain silent or offer vague responses, such as “I wait patiently” or “I have not been blessed yet.” Similarly, it is appropriate for a foreign national to express sympathy when discussing conflict or war.

Gestures

Congolese often use gestures to emphasize or substitute for speech. For example, gently hitting a closed fist on an open palm several times indicates that a place, such as a restaurant or bus, is full. Pointing with the index finger is considered rude, although motioning with the entire hand or head (nose or chin first) is an acceptable alternative. Both the “thumbs-up” sign and an extended middle finger are considered vulgar.

Language Training Resources

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

Useful Translations

English	French	Lingala
Hello	Bonjour	Mbote
How are you?	Comment allez-vous?	Sango nini?
I am fine, thanks, and you?	Bien, merci, et vous?	Nazali malamu, melesi, na yo?
I understand	Je comprend	Nazali koyoka
Do you speak English?	Parlez-vous anglais?	Olobaka ngelesa?
I do not speak ___	Je ne parle pas ___	Nalobaka ___ te
Yes	Oui	Ee
No	Non	Te
OK	Bien	Nandimi
What is your name?	Comment vous appelez vous?	Nkombo na yo nani?
My name is ___	Je m'appelle ___	Nkombo na ngali ezali ___
Good day (AM)	Bonjour	Mbote
Good day (PM)	Bonsoir	Butu elamu
Goodbye (AM)	Au revoir	Kende malamu
Goodbye (PM)	Au revoir	Butu elamu
Please	S'il vous plaît	Palado
Thank you	Merci	Melesi
You are welcome	De rien	Likambo te
Excuse me / I'm sorry	Excusez-moi / Je suis desole	Limbisa ngai / Nazali na mawa
Today	Aujourd'hui	Lilo
Tomorrow	Demain	Lobi
I am pleased to meet you	Enchanté	Nasepeli na kokutana na yo.
Who?	Qui?	Nani?
What?	Quoi?	Nini?
When?	Quand?	Ntango nini?
Where?	Où?	Wapi?
Why?	Pourquoi?	Mpo na nini?
How?	Comment?	Boni?
What is the cost?	Quel est le prix?	Ntalo boni?
Repeat please	Repetez-vous, s'il vous plaît	Lobo liusu palado
Stop!	Arretez!	Telema!
Go!	Allez!	Bokende!

7. LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE

Literacy

- Total population over age 15 who can read and write: 81%
- Male: 90%
- Female: 72% (2022 estimate)

Traditional Education

Since traditional educational methods were never uniform across the DRC, most children historically learned the fundamental values, morals, skills, and knowledge of their respective ethnic groups through an informal, experiential process. In this traditional model, education incorporated Congolese folklore in the form of stories, proverbs, and poems to reinforce ethnic social values and promote a sense of community. Other activities, such as word games and counting, helped children learn articulation and pronunciation through rapid repetition. Certain ceremonies, such as initiation rites, also played an important role in imparting knowledge and passing on morals and values (see p3 of *Family and Kinship*).

History of Formal Education

Portuguese explorers and Catholic missionaries brought new models of education to the mouth of the Congo River in the late 15th century (see p2-3 of *History and Myth* and p2 of *Religion and Spirituality*). Missionaries traveled throughout the Kongo Kingdom, founding formal, Western-style schools and creating written forms of native languages (see p1-3 *Language and Communication*). When the Portuguese departed the area in 1615, they abandoned these mission schools.

Formal education did not return to the area until more than 250 years later, when Protestant and Catholic missionaries arrived from Europe and the US in the late 19th century. Later, during the Belgian Congo period (see p5-6 of *History and Myth*), the colonial government gave the Catholic Church full responsibility for the colony's education system. The Belgians provided funds for the system yet little oversight or direction.

Both missionaries and colonial administrators alike considered Congolese to be childlike, uncivilized, and incapable of substantive work. Consequently, missionary schools imparted only basic literacy and numeracy to Congolese students, which qualified them for little more than menial jobs or, at best, low-level work as clerks or assistants. Only a few Congolese who were studying to become priests received instruction beyond primary school. It was not until the late 1950s, on the eve of the DRC's independence, that colonial administrators finally tried to extend secondary and higher education to regular Congolese.

Education after Independence

Although the government of the newly independent Republic of the Congo (the DRC's name until 1971) prioritized improvements to the education system, protracted political turmoil stymied progress. Throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s, religious organizations ran most of the country's primary schools and half of its secondary schools. Educational quality was low and fees were high at all levels, leading to university student protests and violent government responses.

In the early 1970s President Mobutu began nationalizing the country's schools, removing religious groups and other private organizations from the education system completely. A decade later, after educational quality had failed to improve, churches and private organizations were allowed again to manage and staff schools.

Educational development continued to lag in the 1990s as the government focused on containing the violence and unrest that had spilled over its eastern borders from Rwanda (see p9 of *History and Myth*). During this period, the government spent more than twice as much on the military as it did on education. Although education's share of the national budget had historically remained low, it has grown in recent years: in 2022, the DRC spent the equivalent of 3% of GDP on education, on par with sub-Saharan Africa's average of 3.2%.

Modern Education System

While Congolese generally consider education valuable to their quality of life, various challenges tend to impede achieving their educational goals. A foremost concern is lack of resources. Schools throughout the DRC do not have enough personnel, supplies, or facilities. Moreover, teachers are paid poorly and some demand bribes from students in exchange for grades.

Barriers to enrollment present another challenge. It is estimated that 4 million children between the ages of 6 and 11 are not enrolled in school. A disproportionate number of those children are female. Some children do not attend school because they must work to help provide for their families, while others come from large families that cannot afford school fees for all of their children. Abandoned, orphaned, or internally displaced children often lack access to schooling, while dropout rates among the few who do attend school are high. Finally, basic security concerns abound, especially in the eastern DRC where many parents refuse to send their children to school for fear of rebel abductions (see p7-8 of *Political and Social Relations*).

Despite these challenges, enrollments are growing in the DRC. In addition, more church-affiliated private schools are opening, although they usually serve only well-off families that can afford their high fees. Without adequate and reliable funding from the government, many public schools rely entirely on local financial support from families, businesses, parent-teacher associations, and various civic groups.

Primary: Although primary education is free and compulsory for children age 6-12, many underfunded schools charge fees and do not enforce attendance. At 69% the primary school attendance rate is relatively high, although the completion rate is only 83%. There are several reasons for this low completion rate. Some students are forced to drop out of school because their families need them to earn money or perform domestic tasks (see p2 of *Family and Kinship*). Others live in areas so remote that regular school attendance is impossible.

Although all Congolese primary schools provide instruction in the dominant national language of the region (see p1 of *Language and Communication*), many children arrive at school speaking only a local language. Consequently, those children typically struggle to keep up with course material while learning a new language. After 6 years of primary school, students must pass a national examination to proceed with secondary study.

Secondary: Taught in French, secondary education is neither compulsory nor free. Students choose between 2 "cycles" of study which includes some English language instruction. The ***cycle longue*** (long cycle) includes 2 years of ***tronc commun*** (general education) and then 4 years of general, technical, or pedagogical training. The ***cycle court*** (short cycle) comprises 4 years of vocational training. Upon completing one of these cycles, students must pass the ***examen d'état*** (state exam) to receive a diploma and qualify for higher education. Individual universities rarely have separate entrance exams. As of 2022, 46% of students were enrolled in secondary education.

Tertiary: As of 2022, the DRC had 38 public universities. Of the 375 public and private post-secondary institutions, more than 100 were shut down in order to improve the standards of education. While enrollment in post-secondary institutions is high in the DRC compared to other countries in sub-Saharan Africa, about half of students drop out after their second year.

Since state support is limited, universities receive most of their funding from private sources. Since these funds are far from adequate, educational quality has diminished in recent years even beyond its previously low standards. Even private institutions struggle to find staff. They hire part-time instructors because they cannot find or afford to hire full-time professors. This problem is aggravated by the DRC's acute struggle with "brain drain," a social phenomenon whereby a society's skilled and educated workers immigrate to other countries.

8. TIME AND SPACE

Concept of Time

Most Congolese have a relaxed view toward time and value relationships more than schedules. They typically prefer to take events as they come rather than obsessing about plans for the future. Due to these perspectives, Congolese are accustomed to "making do" with present circumstances and often view delays as opportunities to enjoy the moment rather than inconveniences.

Time and Work

Congolese businesses typically are open 8:00am-3:00pm Monday through Friday and 7:30am until noon on Saturday. Some shops remain open as late as 6:00pm, while others may also keep longer hours but close for a 2-3 hour lunch break in the middle of the day. Most government offices operate between 8:00am-4:00pm.

Time Zones: The DRC spans two time zones. The western 1/3 of the country, which includes Kinshasa, observes West Africa Time (WAT), which is 1 hour ahead of Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) and 6 hours ahead of US Eastern Standard Time (EST). The eastern 2/3 of the country adheres to Central Africa Time (CAT), which runs 1 hour ahead of WAT. Unlike the US, the DRC does not observe Daylight Savings Time. Since the DRC sits on the Equator, day and night are of roughly equal length throughout the year.

National Flag Ceremonies: All Congolese are required by law to acknowledge the raising and lowering of the Congolese flag at government facilities. These two ceremonies typically occur around 7:30am and 6:00pm respectively, during which Congolese pedestrians and motorists are required to stop all movement. Foreign nationals are advised to do the same.

Public Holidays

- January 1: New Year's Day
- January 4: Martyrs' Day
- January 16-17: Heroes' Days
- March – April (variable): Easter
- May 1: Labor Day
- May 17: National Liberation Day
- June 30: Independence Day
- August 1: Parents' Day
- October 14: Youth Day
- November 17: Armed Forces Day
- December 25: Christmas Day

Punctuality

While Congolese do not expect punctuality in social situations, they typically do expect it in business or educational contexts. Accordingly, most Congolese adhere to deadlines where possible, although interruptions are common and tolerated. Moreover, Congolese understand that life is unpredictable and are willing to forego schedules if family obligations arise.

In some cases, Congolese keep other people—even those of high status—waiting while attending to situations of seemingly minor importance. Foreign nationals who encounter this type of situation are advised to be patient in keeping with this local tradition. To show irritation could be viewed as disrespectful.

Negotiations

Most Congolese prefer to develop personal relationships with their business partner as a means of establishing trust. They are agreeable to bargaining and negotiating, although they are unlikely to make a decision without detailed contextual information and ample time to deliberate. Contracts are difficult to enforce in the DRC unless they were made with a senior government official or a representative of another well-known institution. Foreign nationals are advised to have all plans of action and agreements in official writing.

Personal Space

When conversing with new acquaintances, Congolese typically maintain an arm's length of distance. With family, friends, and others with whom they are familiar, Congolese typically stand much closer. They also tend to prefer close proximity in public spaces. For example, Congolese on an almost empty bus probably would sit close to each other.

Touch

While norms of social interaction vary across ethnic groups, Congolese use some degree of casual touching when conversing. Members of the same sex sometimes hold hands or link arms in public as a sign a friendship. Public displays of romantic affection traditionally have been uncommon, although some touching except for kissing is acceptable in urban areas.

Eye Contact

Congolese consider constant eye contact intimidating or even disrespectful and therefore tend to alter their gaze when talking with others. When conversing with superiors, Congolese look down or away to indicate respect. In some cases, women and children also avert their gaze when speaking to men.

Left Hand Taboo

As in many parts of Africa and Asia, Congolese typically use the left hand only for personal hygiene and consider it unclean. They typically use only the right hand when gesturing, shaking hands, or giving or receiving objects – foreign nationals are advised to do the same.

Photographs

Taking photopraphs in the DRC requires a permit, which is easily available in Kinshasa or provincial capital cities. Nevertheless, even photographers with permits may attract suspicion from Congolese authorities, particularly when in proximity to the Congo River in Kinshasa, the Presidential Palace, government buildings, border checkpoints, military installations, or strategic infrastructure, all of which are off-limits. Violating these policies can lead to fines or arrest.

9. AESTHETICS AND RECREATION

Overview

Congolese dress, recreation, music, and art are a dynamic mix of indigenous and foreign influences. Although stunted by conflict and political instability (see p7-8 of *Political and Social Relations*), many artistic trends that originated in the DRC have become popular across Africa and the world.

Dress and Appearance

Most Congolese value a neat and tidy appearance. Even poor Congolese strive to keep themselves clean and well-groomed. Men typically keep their hair neat by wearing it short, while women tend to wear elaborate braids.

Traditional: For daily wear, most Congolese historically wore skirts or aprons made from tree bark of ***raffia*** palm fibers, while chiefs wore aprons or capes made from animal skins. Body art and adornments, including scar designs, jewelry, and makeup, were an important part of a person's appearance and indicated wealth, social status, or ethnic affiliation. As some Congolese still do today, both men and women wore elaborate hairstyles, which often featured braids or were whitened with ash.

Modern: In rural areas, both male and female attire often combines traditional elements with Western styles. While men often wear pants or shorts, women tend to wear a ***liputa*** or ***pagne***, a long dress or skirt made from colorfully patterned fabric. Sometimes they pair this garment with a matching blouse or headscarf. Women may also wrap an extra piece of fabric around their bodies for carrying children or goods.

In urban areas, many Congolese wear Western-style garments, such as t-shirts, trousers, skirts, and sandals. Some men wear a ***boubou*** or ***dashiki*** – colorful, loose-fitting shirt, over slacks. Many women wear a blouse over a ***liputa*** or skirt. Congolese consider jeans and shorts inappropriate in business settings.

"Down with the Suit"

During his "Authenticity" movement (see p8 of *History and Myth*), President Mobutu banned some Western styles, including suits and ties. He promoted as an alternative the ***abacost*** (short for ***à bas le costume***, French for "down with the suit"), a suit similar to those worn by former Chinese leader Mao Zedong. Some Congolese continued to wear the ***abacost*** regularly until the Kabila government outlawed the garment in 1997 due to its association with the old regime.

Recreation

Congolese spend much of their free time socializing with family and friends at home or engaging in public activities such as dancing, conversing, playing games, and watching sports and movies. Churches are also an important social venue (see p4 of *Religion and Spirituality*). In urban areas, young people often gather at nightclubs or ***ngandas*** (roadside food stands). Since many Congolese cannot afford to purchase toys, children often make their own from discarded materials. For example, a child might make a soccer ball with tightly wound plastic bags.

Sports and Games

Football: Football (soccer) is the DRC's most popular sport. In addition to watching matches, Congolese of all ages regularly play football in both formal and informal settings. The national team, nicknamed "the Leopards," won Africa's Cup of Nations in 1968 and 1974 and became the first African team to qualify for the FIFA World Cup in 1974. While the Leopards won the inaugural African Championship of Nations in 2009, they lost at the group stage in the 2013 Africa Cup of Nations.

Basketball: Basketball's popularity has grown in the DRC as the national team has enjoyed success and Congolese players have excelled in foreign leagues. The best-known Congolese player, Dikembe Mutombo, was named Defensive Player of the Year 4 times in his 18-year National Basketball Association (NBA) career (1991-2009). Another Congolese, Mwadi Mabika, played for 11 years in the Women's NBA.

Other Sports: Both volleyball and track and field have enjoyed increased popularity in the DRC in recent years. In addition, the DRC has been associated with boxing since 1974, when Zaire (former name for the DRC) hosted the legendary "Rumble in the Jungle" between George Foreman and Muhammad Ali.

Games: Congolese of all ages play a range of games, such as chess, checkers, and card games. Also popular is ***mankala***, a traditional game in which 2 players move seeds or pebbles across a board having 24 slots in an effort to capture each other's game pieces.

Music and Dance

Music and dance traditionally have been a key component of rites of passage and various ethnic ceremonies (see p3 of *Family and Kinship*). Instruments used to play traditional music include xylophones, drums, bells, and thumb pianos known as ***kalimbas*** or ***likembes***, which are played by using the thumb to pluck metal strips.

Modern Congolese music, which sometimes is still referred to as ***musique zaïroise***, is popular not only across Africa but also in many parts of the world. The best-known form of Congolese dance music is ***soukous*** (Lingala for "shake"). Often referred to as the DRC's national dance, ***soukous*** is heavily influenced by Cuban rumba and other Latin American dances. It combines the sounds of guitars, horns, and drums into an upbeat rhythm. A similar style is ***kwasa-kwasa***, which has fast, hip-shaking rhythms and is often played at nightclubs. ***Ndombolo***—a blend of rumba, funk, and soul—is also related to ***soukous***.

Several Congolese musicians have attracted large followings outside the DRC. Prominent examples include Antoine Wendo Kolosoy (referred to as Papa Wendo) and his Grand Zaïko Orchestra, Tabu Ley Rochereau, Koffi Olomidé, and Werrason of the Wenge Maison Mère band. Within the DRC, two of the more popular musicians are Innos'B, a pop idol, and Lexxus Legal, a rapper based in Kinshasa.

Theater

While the specifics vary by ethnic group, the performing arts historically have permeated Congolese society as religious rituals, educational instruction, and entertainment. Since the 20th century, Congolese artists have also embraced modern theater. Albert Mongito was a pioneer of Congolese theater who wrote a famous play honoring Henry Morton Stanley (see *History and Myth*, p4) in 1954. Today, much of the DRC's theater covers political, economic, or social themes.

Literature

Prior to the advent of written literature in the DRC, inhabitants of the region transmitted history and traditions orally in the form of poems, proverbs, riddles, and stories (see p11 of *History and Myth* and p1 of *Learning and Knowledge*). In recent years, scholars have tried to collect and document some of this folklore in order to preserve the DRC's literary heritage.

The DRC has produced relatively little written literature even though Kikongo (see p2 of *Language and Communication*) became the first Bantu language to be written more than 4 centuries ago. Publishers in the DRC today produce around 100 titles per year, most of which are written in French. Congolese authors typically write about social issues, ethnic relations, Congolese identity, and the legacy of European colonialism. Several Congolese authors have earned international acclaim for their work. The most notable examples are Timothée Malembe, Vumbi Yoka Mudimbe, Mbwil a Mpang Ngal, and Dieudonne Mutombo. The DRC also has produced notable literary critics, such as Buata Malela.

The DRC has been the setting for the works of many well-known foreign authors. The most famous example is Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), which tells the story of a European trader. More recently, VS Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* (1979), captures the saga of an Indian shopkeeper in Kisangani, while Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998) chronicles an American missionary family in the DRC.

Arts and Crafts

Congolese arts and crafts historically have served both practical and spiritual purposes. Many ethnic groups created wooden masks to be worn during important ceremonies and rituals, such as ancestor worship, initiations, and funerals (see p1-2 of *Religion and Spirituality* and p3-4 of *Family and Kinship*). In the 20th century these masks became well-known worldwide and even inspired such world-famous artists as Pablo Picasso.

Another art form traditionally common in the DRC are wooden sculptures carved into human or human-like shapes, often with exaggerated facial features or body parts. Although the designs of such sculptures varied by region and ethnic group, many groups believed these sculptures contained spiritual power. For example, members of the Kongo ethnic group believed that their elaborate ***nkisi nkondi*** statues had the power to absorb curses of evil spirits and thereby render those curses harmless. Other groups carved statues of great kings that were meant to embody the souls of those kings once they passed away. After Christianity arrived in the region (see p2 of *Religion and Spirituality*), copper and ivory crucifixes became common objects of art.

Today most of the DRC's traditional arts and crafts are made specifically for tourists' sales, although some art forms such as pottery, beaded jewelry, and baskets and mats woven from ***raffia*** palm fibers continue to serve practical purposes.

Modern Art: Many contemporary artists in the DRC depict the history and struggles of the Congolese people in their works. Chéri Samba, the founder of the modern painting movement in the DRC, often uses bright colors to evoke societal themes. His famous painting "Little Kadogo," for example, depicts a child soldier surrounded by tropical flowers. By contrast, Bodys Isek Kingelez, a sculptor, uses everyday objects like cardboard, tin foil, and bottle caps to create scenes such as "***Ville Fantome***" (Phantom City), a model of Kinshasa.

10. SUSTENANCE AND HEALTH

Sustenance Overview

While traditional Congolese cuisine is flavorful and varied, many of the DRC's inhabitants do not have access to nutritious foods on a daily basis. This insufficient diet leads to issues such as protein deficiency and the DRC's generally poor health status.

Dining Customs

Congolese typically eat two meals daily: a light breakfast in the morning and a heartier main meal in the late afternoon or early evening. In rural parts of the country, families typically dine while sitting on the floor and share a communal bowl. Each member takes food from the portion of the bowl directly in front of him. By contrast, many city dwellers prefer to eat sitting at a table and using utensils. Traditionally, men eat first, followed by women and children. When a host offers food to guests, they customarily accept by first showing reluctance as a sign of humility.

Diet

Most Congolese obtain the bulk of their calories from starches, vegetables, and fruits, consuming only modest amounts of protein. The largest meal typically consists of a starch served with vegetable sauce, which only occasionally contains pieces of meat or fish. Breakfast usually consists of simple foods, such as tea and bread, or food left over from the previous day's main meal. Popular snacks include fruit, honeycomb, and palm nuts.

Starch: Congolese eat a variety of starches, including cassava (also called manioc), corn, plantains (a type of banana), sweet potatoes, and yams. Although rice is also available in the DRC, only wealthy people can afford it. Congolese most commonly prepare starch by soaking, boiling, and then pounding it into a paste known as ***fufu***. Then, while eating, they scoop ***fufu*** into a ball and dip it into an accompanying stew or sauce. Congolese also prepare cassava, the most popular starch, by grinding it into

kwanga (flour) and then using the ***kwanga*** to make bread. Alternative preparations of other starches vary by region.

Fruits and Vegetables: Congolese enjoy a variety of fruits and vegetables. Popular fruits include bananas, mangoes, oranges, ***pawpaws*** (papayas), and plantains, while popular vegetables include eggplant, pumpkin, okra, onions, and wild mushrooms.

Protein: The popularity of different protein sources varies regionally in the DRC. For example, inhabitants of the Kasai region commonly eat insects, including ants, caterpillars, crickets, grasshoppers, and grubs. By contrast, the people of Equateur Province prefer bushmeat (a catch-all term used for many types of wild game, including antelope, monkey, porcupine, and snake). Congolese who live near rivers or the ocean get much of their protein from fish, especially perch and prawns, and often engage in small-scale fish farming. While meats like beef and pork are hard to find outside urban areas, many rural Congolese enjoy chicken and goat. Due to the high cost of meat, Congolese use it sparingly when cooking. Some Congolese eat meat only on special occasions.

Popular Dishes: Despite the scarcity of protein in the DRC, its "national dish" is a chicken-based stew. Known as ***moambé***, it contains chicken, palm oil, peanuts, and tomatoes, and usually is served with ***fufu***. Other popular dishes typically consist of vegetables and starches wrapped in leaves and then smoked or grilled.

Beverages

Popular non-alcoholic beverages include herbal tea, especially lemongrass tea, and soft drinks, such as Coca-Cola and Fanta. Since the DRC's tap water is not safe to drink, bottled water is also popular and widely available. Congolese also consume a range of alcoholic beverages. In addition to traditional options like palm wine and traditionally brewed beer, local brands (Primus and Skol) offer German- and Belgian-style beer.

Health Overview

The Congolese face major health challenges. At just 63 years, their life expectancy is on par with the sub-Saharan African average of 61 years and far below the global average of 73 years. Similarly, the DRC's maternal and infant mortality rates are among the world's highest—approximately 57 in 1,000 newborns die before reaching 1 year old. Although adequate medical care is available in Kinshasa and some other cities, rural areas face a severe shortage of supplies, medical personnel, and other resources. This problem is compounded by the DRC's ongoing instability and violence (see p7-8 of *Political and Social Relations*).

Traditional Medicine

Traditional medicine comprises knowledge, skills, and practices that are used to pursue holistic health and are derived from the beliefs, theories, and experiences of indigenous populations. In the DRC, many people seek medical treatment from ***ngangas*** (traditional healers) because they tend to be more convenient and less expensive than Western-style doctors. The Congolese government acknowledges that traditional remedies can be as effective as conventional remedies for certain conditions and supports their use in those cases. Although ***ngangas*** dispense herbal medicine, they also treat illness by communicating with ancestral spirits (see p1 & 6 of *Religion and Spirituality*). For example, ***ngangas*** sometimes perform rituals in which they utter certain phrases, sacrifice chickens, or consult ***nkisis*** (containers filled with ritual objects and medicines).

Modern Healthcare System

The DRC's Ministry of Health oversees the country's healthcare system, which is comprised of 401 general hospitals and over 8,266 lower-level health facilities. Nearly all of the DRC's health facilities are located near urban areas. Since few Congolese have access to health insurance, most people pay out-of-pocket or depend upon free services run by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or religious groups. Medicine is typically scarce and expensive, and patients often must supply their own bandages and surgical materials.

Infectious Diseases

Malaria: According to the DRC's Ministry of Health, malaria is the country's leading cause of death. Moreover, malaria accounts for more than 19% of deaths among children under age 5. The disease is endemic to most of the DRC and is transmitted year-round.

Tuberculosis (TB): TB is also a leading cause of death in the DRC. In 2021, the country had 305,000 newly diagnosed cases, which led to about 49,000 deaths. Moreover, in 2022, the DRC was one of 30 high-burden countries and accounted for 3% of global TB cases. Preventing TB transmission is complicated because the bacterium that causes the disease spreads through the air and does not always cause obvious symptoms.

HIV/AIDS: Although the DRC's HIV prevalence rate of 0.6% is lower than the sub-Saharan African average of 3.8%, the spread of the disease has increased due to internal displacement and ongoing sexual violence (see p2 *Sex and Gender*). Moreover, few HIV-positive pregnant women receive the treatment needed to prevent mother-to-child transmission.

Other Diseases: Ebola virus disease (EVD), which humans most commonly contract by handling or eating meat infected with the Ebola virus, is a major concern in the DRC due to bushmeat's continued popularity (see p2 above). EVD causes fever and hemorrhaging and is fatal in many cases. In the DRC's 2018-21 outbreak, 3,308 infections resulted in 2,250 deaths. Some diseases that have been eradicated in much of the world—including plague, polio, and whooping cough— remain a serious concern in the DRC.

Other Health Challenges

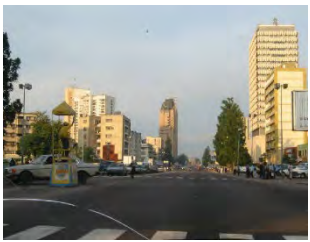
It is estimated that 1.1 million Congolese children under 5 are malnourished. In addition, outbreaks of cholera and schistosomiasis (a disease caused by parasitic worms) remain common due to the DRC's lack of adequate sanitation and drinking water. Onchocerciasis, also known as river blindness, is also a significant problem.

11. ECONOMICS AND RESOURCES

Overview

Due to armed conflict, political instability, and a drop in foreign aid following the Cold War (see p9 of *History and Myth*), the DRC's economy contracted sharply between 1989 and 2001. During that period, the country's gross domestic product (GDP) nearly halved, shrinking by an average rate of 5% per year. Growth returned in 2002 with the accession of Joseph Kabila and a ceasefire in the Second Congo War (see p10 of *History and Myth*), although the economy still faces serious challenges.

The foremost concern is likely the DRC's reliance upon minerals, which are a major source of income but cause problems in several ways. Mineral wealth tends to promote conflict by luring both state and non-state groups into pursuing a share of the profits. Moreover, mineral wealth encourages activities that harm the environment (see p3 of *Political and Social Relations*) and presents opportunities for corruption on the part of government officials. Finally, the Congolese government's reliance on mineral income ties the national budget to volatile commodity prices, making it harder for the government to plan for the future and restrain the growth of already massive public debts.



Perhaps the most serious drawback associated with the DRC's mineral wealth is the government's reliance on it rather than tax revenue. Consequently, politicians have little incentive to provide the Congolese population public services and a physical infrastructure since they were not taxed accordingly. This situation is especially problematic because the DRC's infrastructure is insufficient (see p1-2 *Technology and Material*), and its people are among the poorest in the world. The DRC has the world's 4th lowest GDP per person and was ranked 180th of 193 countries in the United Nations' (UN) 2023 Human

Development Index (HDI), which ranks countries by their standard of living.

Agriculture

Accounting for about 17% of total GDP, the DRC's agricultural sector consists mostly of subsistence farming and some cash-crop cultivation. Primary food crops include cassava (a fibrous root), plantains (a starchy type of banana), beans, corn, yams, peanuts, and rice (see p1-2 of *Sustenance and Health*). Coffee, grown primarily in the North and East, is the leading cash crop followed by cotton and cocoa. Since 55% of the DRC is woodland, the country also exports timber species such as ebony, eucalyptus, mahogany, and teak.

Livestock and Fishing: DRC's animal husbandry has been victim to an often fatal infection transmitted by the tsetse fly. Nevertheless, 8% of the DRC is covered by pastureland, where farmers raise animals such as ducks, chickens, goats, and cattle. The DRC also has substantial fish stocks, although the size of the industry is unknown because most fishing occurs on a small scale for private consumption (see p2 of *Sustenance and Health*). Common species include Nile perch (also known as ***capitaine***), catfish, and eels.

Services

Although the services sector technically constitutes about 34% of the DRC's GDP, it is difficult to measure because much of its activity occurs in the vast, unregulated informal economy. For urban residents, in particular, small-scale service occupations in the informal economy—for example, minor retail trade—are the most common way to make a living.

Tourism: The DRC's recent history of conflict has all but destroyed the country's tourism industry, despite the fact that the DRC has several potential attractions. Most notably is its population of lowland gorillas, which live mostly in Kahuzi-Biéga National Park in the eastern DRC.

Industry

Although the industrial sector constitutes 47% of GDP, it accounts for the country's primary exports—diamonds, copper, and cobalt. In conjunction with foreign mining firms, a state-owned entity called Gécamines (a French abbreviation for "General Quarries and Mines") mines most of the DRC's copper and cobalt in Katanga Province in the South. By contrast, small-scale artisan miners unearth most diamonds in the two Kasai provinces, which are located north of Katanga.

The Kivu provinces in the East also have substantial deposits of gold, tin, and coltan (an ore containing elements used in the manufacture of smartphones and other electronics). Although the DRC once derived a large share of its export earnings from these minerals, that share has declined due to illegal mining by Rwandan, Ugandan, and rebel combatants. In most cases, illegally mined minerals are smuggled into Rwanda or Uganda for re-export.

Oil: With about 180 million barrels of proven reserves, the DRC has the world's 58th largest crude oil reserves. Although most of the DRC's oil currently comes from Atlantic Ocean offshore wells, new reserves discovered in the East offer hope for future exploitation. The DRC has one oil refinery near Moanda on the Atlantic Coast.

Other Minerals: The DRC also has large deposits of zinc, iron ore, silver, uranium, coal, manganese, and bauxite. Of note, Congolese uranium was used in Fat Man and Little Boy, the atomic bombs that the US detonated during World War II.

Manufacturing: Constituting only a small part of the Congolese economy, manufacturing output has declined significantly since independence. Located primarily in Kinshasa and Lubumbashi, Congolese manufacturers make processed foods, bottled beverages, cigarettes, clothing, shoes, building materials, tires, and paints primarily for the domestic market.

Currency

The DRC's official currency is the Congolese Franc (CF). It consists of 100 ***centimes*** and is issued in 13 banknotes ranging in value from CF 0.01-CF 500. Since the DRC has difficulty controlling inflation, the value of the Congolese Franc varies widely. From 2010-2015, US$1 averaged approximately CF 971.60 but rose to CF 2,094 in 2023. Due to the Congolese Franc's instability, the US dollar is used widely as an unofficial currency in the DRC. Merchants tend to prefer US dollars but often insist on high-denomination bills in mint condition.

Foreign Trade

The DRC's exports totaled $28.5 billion in 2022, consisting predominantly of minerals and fuels. The largest purchasers of Congolese goods were China (55%) and the Singapore (5%). The DRC's imports totaled $15.4 billion in 2022 and consisted mostly of fuels, ores and minerals, and automobiles. The DRC's main suppliers were China (33%), Zambia (10%) and South Africa (10%).

China: China and the DRC have expanded trade ties in recent years. China is drawn to the DRC primarily because of its coltan reserves, which are a potential source to sustain China's electronics manufacturing industry. The DRC has joined China's Belt and Road Initiative and, while doing so, China canceled Congolese debt worth $28 million and pledged $17 million in aid.

Foreign Aid

With Joseph Kabila's accession to power in 2001 (see *History and Myth*), foreign donors who had shunned the DRC during the Mobutu and elder Kabila regimes returned to the country in force, especially after the restoration of multi-party elections in 2006. In 2020 and 2021, the DRC received disbursements of $3.4 and $3.5 billion, respectfully, in official development assistance. Historically, the largest single-party donor was the US, which contributed an average of approximately $844 million. Other large donors included the International Development Association, the International Monetary Fund, the Global Fund, and the EU. In 2022, the US provided $792 million in aid.

12. TECHNOLOGY AND MATERIAL

Overview
Government mismanagement and nearly continuous conflict left DRC's infrastructure neglected for many years. With the help of Chinese investment in recent years, efforts to renovate and expand the country's transit links are now underway (see p4 of *Economics and Resources*).

Transportation
Since private cars and public transport are uncommon in the DRC, Congolese typically travel on foot for journeys less than 5 mi and on ramshackle mini-buses for longer overland trips. Although some taxis are available in major cities, most of them are poorly maintained. All modes of transport in the DRC tend to be overcrowded.

Riverborne Travel: As the Congo River wends its way through much of the DRC, riverborne travel is common. For short trips in remote regions, the most common vessel is the ***pirogue***, or dugout canoe. For longer journeys, riverboats and barges are popular choices. In Kinshasa, both a public ferry and fast motorboats are available to cross the river to Brazzaville, the capital of the neighboring Republic of the Congo.

Roadways: Although the DRC has more than 95,070 mi of roadways, only about 6% of them are paved. Consequently, much of the DRC's road network becomes impassable from flooding during the rainy season (see p3-4 of *Political and Social Relations*). Besides, other modes of transport are more popular because the road network is small and incomplete. Due to Chinese investment (see p4 of *Economics and Resources*), the DRC's road network is currently in the process of being renovated and expanded.

Railways: The DRC has about 2,262 mi of railways. Built mainly to bypass unnavigable portions of the Congo River, the DRC's railways do not form a continuous network. Although limited passenger service is available, the rail system is used primarily for hauling mineral freight (see p3 of *Economics and Resources*). Like the road network, the DRC's railways are being renovated and expanded with Chinese aid.

Waterways and Ports: Due mostly to the Congo River and its tributaries, the DRC has around 10,100 mi of navigable inland waterways. The Congo River alone has 2 main navigable sections: the middle Congo extends more than 1,000 mi between Kisangani in the East and Kinshasa in the West, while the lower Congo extends around 100 mi from Matadi in the East to the Atlantic Ocean in the West. These port cities serve as primary transport hubs. Due partly to the Congo River's substantial width, it has only 2 bridges each at Kinshasa and Bukama to the southeast.

Airways: Of DRC's 198 or so airports and airstrips, only 26 have paved runways. Located 15 mi east of Kinshasa, ***Aéroport de N'djili*** is the country's main international transit hub. Lubumbashi and Goma are also important hubs. Air transit historically has been important in the DRC due to the country's large size and the dangers associated with overland travel. Yet, the DRC's airlines have some of the worst aviation safety records in the world—over 10 fatal accidents have occurred since 2010.

Energy

Since electricity is rare in small towns and villages, most rural-dwelling Congolese use wood as their main source of domestic fuel. While urban-dwelling Congolese typically have access to electricity, power outages are common even in the largest cities. Generating electricity mainly through hydropower plants, the DRC produces more electricity than it consumes. The most productive plants are the Inga I and II plants near Matadi.

Media

While the DRC's constitution guarantees freedom of expression and of the press, both rights are subject to some restrictions. While it is illegal to publically insult the head-of-state, Congolese can openly express their political views as long as it is not through the media. The government sometimes uses legal threats or assault to pressure journalists into self-censoring. In mid-2012, for example, the government threatened treason charges against journalists who failed to report "responsibly," or as the government expected, about violence in the eastern DRC (see p7-8 of *Political and Social Relations*).

Print Media: There are approximately 450 registered papers in the DRC. The most popular daily paper is *Le Potentiel*, which typically takes an opposition stance. Other popular opposition papers include *Le Phare* and *La Reference Plus*. The leading pro-government papers are *L'Avenir* and *Le Palmares*.

Radio and TV: Radio is the DRC's most popular medium due to its accessibility and low cost. The only station with national reach is Radio Okapi, which is operated by MONUSCO, a UN peacekeeping force (see *Political and Social Relations*, p5). While the DRC has a state TV broadcaster called *Radio Television Nationale Congolaise* (RTNC), it ceased national broadcasts in the late 1990s and now broadcasts only locally.

Telecommunications

Mobile phones are more readily available than wired and have undergone rapid growth in recent years. Although in 2000 there were only 15,000 mobile subscriptions, by 2022 that number had grown to 50 million, or about 50 in 100 Congolese.

Internet: Although usage increased by more than 200% between 2016 and 2021, only a small minority (about 23%) of the Congolese population use the Internet. Due to lack of broadband connections, the DRC's average download speeds are among the world's slowest and are about 40 times slower than those of the US.

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