



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

## BACKGROUND

### Land and Climate

Mali, the eighth largest country in Africa, is about the size of South Africa and nearly twice the size of the U.S. state of Texas. Mali's climate is dry and one of the hottest in the world. The vast northern part of the country lies in the southern Sahara Desert, which is characterized by very little rainfall and average temperatures that well exceed 100°F (38°C) during the day while dipping below 50°F (10°C) at night. In central Mali, the semiarid Sahel region has limited vegetation, mostly in the form of bushes and a few trees. Together, desert or semidesert regions cover 65 percent of the country.

The Sudanic zone is located in the south. It is the wettest area of Mali, especially during the rainy season (June–September). Average temperatures there range between 75°F (24°C) and 86°F (30°C). Some southern areas have a subtropical climate, with abundant vegetation and mango groves. The fertile Niger River area is home to most of Mali's economic activity. During the dry season, Malians plant vegetable gardens by the river. Environmental issues like silting and water pollution affect the Niger River's role as a vital water source. Bamako, the nation's capital and largest city, is a major regional trading center positioned on the Niger River in Mali's southwest. The river's northern delta is submerged annually.

### History

#### Early Empires

From the seventh to the nineteenth centuries, parts of what is now known as Mali were ruled by the kings of the Ghana, Mali, Songhai, Bambara, Peul, and Toucouleur empires. In 1240, Sundiata Keïta unified several Malinké kingdoms and established the Mali Empire. Under the rule of Mansa Musa, the Mali Empire grew, and by the 14th century, it had reached its peak as the richest and largest West African empire. While the Mali Empire began its decline in the 15th century, the Songhai Empire expanded its power and took control of some parts of the territory. During this time, the city of Timbuktu grew into an important trading hub for goods and ideas. Along with Djenné, it also became a center of Islamic learning, a history Malians have preserved through oral storytelling and song. Ancient Arabic manuscripts housed in these cities also recount the history and culture of West African empires.

#### Colonization and Independence

By the early 1900s, nearly all of Africa was colonized by European powers. The French gained control of Mali in the late 1800s, calling it French Sudan, and ruled it as part of a group of territories called French West Africa. The French used French Sudan as a source of labor for their colonies on Africa's west coast. Mali's borders were changed repeatedly until 1947, when the French established the borders that still exist today.

Following World War II, West Africans increasingly criticized colonial rule and the exploitation of the region's resources and people. Political parties formed in 1946 and autonomy grew. However, Mali did not gain independence until 1960, when a socialist government led by Modibo Keita came to power.

#### ***Military Coups and Transition to Democracy***

Shortly after independence, conflicts arose over the political path the new country should take. In 1968, a military coup brought Moussa Traoré to power as president. In 1979, Traoré added civilians to his cabinet and formed what was at the time the country's sole legal political party, called the Democratic Union of the People of Mali (UDPM). Traoré continued as the country's president and general secretary of the UDPM. When popular demonstrations in 1991 were met with Traoré's orders to shoot civilians, Lieutenant Colonel Amadou Toumani Touré rebelled and arrested Traoré. The UDPM was disbanded, and Traoré was convicted of ordering the deaths of the protesters.

The popular Touré quickly worked to establish civilian rule through multiparty elections in 1992. In that same year, voters approved a new constitution, elected a National Assembly, and participated in free presidential elections. Media freedoms also increased. The 2002 election marked Mali's first peaceful transition of power from one democratically elected leader to another.

#### ***Tuareg Rebellion and the Northern Mali Conflict***

Rebellions led by Tuareg groups have occurred throughout Mali's history. The Tuareg are nomadic people who follow their herds through Mali, Niger, Algeria, and Mauritania. Within this community, separatist groups have formed in Mali with the goal of gaining independence for the Tuareg people, who feel that the Malian government does not represent them.

In early 2012, the Tuareg rebel group National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), backed by militant Islamists, began an insurgency in northern Mali. By March, they successfully pushed the Malian army out of several main cities in the northern part of the country, including Gao and Timbuktu. Due to increased frustrations with the government's inability to suppress Tuareg rebel forces, a group of Malian soldiers took over the capital, Bamako. Soon after, the MNLA declared the occupied northern area an independent state called the Republic of Azawad. Under international pressure, the military handed government authority back to a civilian interim government in April.

Eventually the alliance between Tuaregs rebels and Islamists broke down, with the latter seizing control of the territory from the rebels in June. Unlike the MNLA, who wanted a secular state in northern Mali, Islamist militants wanted to impose a strict interpretation of Islamic law in the region. These events created a humanitarian crisis, resulting in the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people. With help from international forces (mainly French and Chadian troops), the Malian military was able to take back control of the north in early 2013. A peace agreement signed between the Tuareg separatists and the government in 2013 broke down quickly and was replaced in 2015 by a deal that offered greater autonomy to the Tuareg in northern Mali, among other

things. However, tensions remain between Tuareg separatists and the Malian government.

#### ***Mali Today***

Islamist militant groups continue to pose a significant challenge to Mali's security. In 2017, Mali formed a military alliance called the G5 Sahel with the neighboring countries of Niger, Chad, Burkina Faso, and Mauritania to combat Islamist insurgent groups in the Sahel region. Attacks by Islamist groups linked to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Boko Haram, and the Islamic State have affected all countries in the alliance in recent years.

Despite regional peacekeeping efforts, persistent violence and insecurity have led Malians to lose faith in their government. In 2020, Malian soldiers once again took control of the government, ousting the president. In addition to political instability, Mali faces challenges such as corruption and extreme poverty.

## **THE PEOPLE**

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### **Population**

The vast majority of Malians reside in the fertile southern third of the country, while only a small segment of the population (mostly nomadic people) live in the arid north. Of the 20 major ethnic groups, several comprise less than 1 percent of the population. Mandé peoples (Bambara, Malinké, and Soninké) make up over half of the population. Of those, the Bambara constitute the largest group and generally populate the central and southern regions. The Malinké live in the southwest and west. The Soninké, also called Sarakolé, usually work as tradesmen and live in the northwest near Mauritania. They can also be found in several other West African nations.

Ethnicity usually corresponds with a person's location within the country, as well as occupation. The Fulani (who are also known as the Peul) are seminomadic herders who traditionally inhabited the northern desert and comprise about 13 percent of the population. Many Fulani migrated south and settled in the central Mopti region due to deteriorating environmental conditions in the north. The Songhai live primarily in the northeast along the Niger River, as do the Bozo, who earn their living from fishing in the Niger Delta. The Dogon live on and around the Bandiagara Escarpment (also called the Dogon Cliffs) in towns like Koro, Douentza, and Bankass. The Menianka and Senufo inhabit the southwest, along the border with Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire. Most of the Menianka and Senufo are farmers. The Tuareg, along with other groups, live in the north and work as craftsmen, traders, and herders.

### **Language**

Mali's large number of languages and dialects reflects the ethnic diversity of the country. The official language, French, is spoken by government administrators and in urban areas; it is also the primary language of school instruction. However, the most widely spoken language is Bambara (also called Bamanankan). Others include Fulfulde (also known as Peul), Sarakole, Senufo, Dogon, Malinké, Bobo, Songhai, Tuareg,

Soninké, Tamashek, and Bozo.

As is common in Africa, many languages are oral, with history transmitted mainly by narration from generation to generation, though in pre-colonial times, Arabic was also used to transcribe histories from local languages. A special caste called the *griot* has the responsibility to recount and sing about the past. Books are generally published in at least four Malian languages.

### Religion

About 94 percent of all Malians are Muslim. Others, especially in the south and along the Dogon Cliffs, adhere to traditional religions, which usually emphasize animism. About 3 percent are Christian, with mainly Protestant and Catholic believers.

Islam entered Mali through the country's northern territory. The Peul, Sarakole, Moor, Songhai, and Tuareg ethnicities have been Muslim since not long after the advent of Islam. Foundational Islamic beliefs include recognizing that there is only one God, *Allah*, and declaring Muhammad to be his prophet; praying five times daily; fasting during the holy month of *Ramadan*; giving alms to the poor (in Mali, this is often the *garibouts*, boys who attend *Qur'anic* schools and must beg for daily food, or others in need); and making a pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia.

Christianity was introduced in Mali through the Kayes region in 1855. It was a major influence on the Bobo and Dogon areas during the colonial period. The majority of these two ethnicities are Christian.

Some Malians incorporate elements of their traditional beliefs, such as using masks or totem animals and wearing *gri gri* charms (amulets used to protect a person from harm or illness), into their religious practices. During the dry seasons, Muslims may gather for prayers at a mosque or a public place to ask *Allah* for rain. To encourage rain for a good harvest or other events, animist communities perform various ceremonies; one includes selecting a large village tree, slaughtering a sheep or goat, smearing the animal's blood on the tree, and dancing around and shouting at the tree.

### General Attitudes

Malians tend to value hard work, honesty, generosity, hospitality, and intelligence in others. Time and schedules are often flexible, allowing Malians to put individuals ahead of meetings or other obligations. Malians are usually polite and friendly. This congeniality helps ensure mutual respect among friends and strangers. If they feel slighted, Malians may make unexpected, teasing comments. These remarks are usually humorous and are regarded as attempts to be nice rather than to offend. Malians often joke with other groups about family names or castes. These "joking cousin" remarks (*Sinankuya* in Bambara, *Bassetarey* in Songhai) help maintain friendly ties and calm tensions between the many groups. Most Malians avoid confrontation and will settle differences through a third party. Many Muslims believe the will of God affects all events.

Malian society was traditionally divided between three classes: nobles, professional groups (including *griots*, or traditional orators, blacksmiths, and others), and enslaved

peoples. However, today these divisions are for the most part considered archaic and are not strongly maintained. Still, though slavery is abolished, people from the enslaved caste may continue to perform duties like cooking or skinning animals during ceremonies. *Griots* also fulfill their traditional roles, including acting as a third-party mediator between members of different communities, facilitating social ceremonies, and communicating or singing, in addition to their daily profession. Artists may sing, while nobles are not allowed to sing or to speak out loud during ceremonies.

Between similar ethnic groups, caste membership determines one's relative social position. However, between dissimilar groups, such as light-skinned peoples versus dark-skinned sub-Saharan Malians, ethnicity is a distinguishing factor and a cause of long-standing tensions. In the past, traditional roles were often more important than assumed roles. For instance, a driver born as a "noble" may have been more respected than a government official from a blacksmith family. However, today, especially in urban areas, education creates more equality between people of diverse backgrounds, and wealth grants social status to any individual.

Traditional moral codes remain prevalent. For example, robbery may be a reason to beat a criminal, while embezzlement of public funds (a relatively modern crime) may be pardonable. Civic alliances and individual wants come second to family loyalties.

### Personal Appearance

Most Malians place great importance on physical appearance. Neatness and modesty are highly valued. For special occasions, Malians will wear their best clothes and gold (women) or silver (men) jewelry. Western clothing is common in urban areas, although women tend to wear traditional clothing more often than men. Men usually wear long pants and a shirt; young boys may wear shorts before circumcision, as shorts are typically associated with childhood. Wealthy men may wear a traditional *bazin* (a colorful, waxy fabric worn during special occasions) *boubou* (long and flowing embroidered robe) over pants and a shirt. Men usually wear sandals.

In rural and some urban areas, Malians may wear *bogolan*, a traditional cloth dyed with mud. Rural Muslim women wear long wraparound skirts, loose blouses (made from the same fabric as the skirt), and sandals; animist women may omit blouses and shoes. Most married women and Muslim women keep their hair covered. Northern Malian women often wear *dampé*, a traditional cloth used to wrap one's self. Northern ethnicities, like the Songhai, Peul, and Tuareg, usually wear turbans and dark colors. In northern communities, the donning of a turban—often done for the first time in a special ceremony—marks the passage to adulthood or married life for men, who are then considered full members of the community. In the past, turbans also marked graduation from traditional *Qur'anic* schools.

## CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

## Greetings

Greetings are an important aspect of Malian culture, and many consider it impolite not to greet another person. Men and women either shake right hands or (sometimes when greeting a member of the opposite gender) clasp their own hands and bow slightly. A man of power (such as a village chief) will always initiate a handshake. Otherwise, a person joining a group or entering a room initiates a handshake with each adult in the room or area, beginning with the eldest or most senior. One may show special respect by touching one's own right elbow with the fingertips of the left hand while shaking right hands. One can also touch the right hand to the forehead or the heart after a gentle handshake.

Verbal greetings vary between ethnic groups. If a person's language is not known, one can greet that person in a commonly spoken language and the other will respond in his or her own language. For example, if one person uses the French *Bonjour* (Good day), the other might respond with the Bambara *I ni ce* (Hello). It is impolite not to greet someone when passing them on a path or street. Friends usually follow greetings with inquiries such as *I somogo be di?* (How is your family?) or *Here tilena wa?* (Did you have a good day?).

A family name provides information about a person's ethnicity, caste, and geographic origins. For example, members of the artist caste may have a last name like Balo (blacksmith for men or potter for women), Sylla (shoemaker), or Guissé (historian). Friends generally address one another by given name.

## Gestures

The left hand is considered unclean, and children may be taught from a young age that devils eat with their left hands. It is therefore disrespectful for Malians to use the left hand for a handshake, to offer food or money with it, to eat with it, or to accept anything with it. The only exception is when a close family member or friend leaves on a long trip, in which case the left hand is used in a handshake as a special gesture to indicate the two people will see each other again. Gesturing with the index finger is impolite; one points with the entire hand. To threaten a person, Malians pivot the index finger up and down. Malians beckon people to come forward by repeatedly opening and closing the hand in the direction of that person. To say good-bye, Malians open and wave the right hand. Personal space is limited, and people of the same gender often touch when conversing. One does not look an elder in the eye during conversation. When a parent is speaking to a child, the child looks down and listens attentively to the parent.

## Visiting

Visiting plays an integral part in Malian society, as it is a way to maintain kinship bonds and friendships. Not visiting someone for an extended period of time reflects poorly on the value of the relationship. Visits between rural friends and relatives occur often and usually unannounced. Evening visits can last several hours. Houseguests may stay several weeks and will bring gifts of kola nuts (a traditional symbol of respect) and food from their home region.

Guests remove their shoes before entering a room or

stepping on a mat. Hosts offer visitors water when they enter a compound and give them the best seat. Hosts usually also serve refreshments, which the guests then offer to share with the hosts since eating in front of others is impolite. In villages, guests bring small gifts to their hosts, often including tea, sugar, or kola nuts. Hosts appreciate compliments on their home but deny them by saying something is not too valuable, expensive, or important out of modesty. If visitors arrive while hosts are eating, they usually will be invited to share the food; unexpected guests might politely decline the meal. A tradition of tea drinking is common among men. They brew three rounds of green tea mixed with sugar and drink the tea from a small glass. This procedure is repeated several times a day.

Visitors to a *dugutigi* (village chief) show him special respect. Those who do not speak the local language (such as government officials or foreigners) will not talk directly to the chief but to one or more translators and intermediaries.

## Eating

Most Malians eat breakfast between 7 and 8 a.m., lunch at 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m., and dinner around 7 or 8 p.m. Families traditionally eat their meals together from communal bowls. The male head of the family determines which groups eat from one of several bowls. For example, men and boys may share one bowl, and small children and/or women share another. Marital status and age also determine eating patterns. Adult men and women seldom eat from the same bowl. In urban areas, schedules do not permit all families to eat together. Wealthy families may eat their meals with a spoon and other utensils, but eating food with the right hand is most common and traditional. Both rural and urban Malians drink out of calabashes (large gourds) with a ladle, though today plastic and aluminum cups are also common.

## LIFESTYLE

### Family

#### Structure

In Malian society, the family is seen as more important than the individual, and family members support each other on a daily basis. Extended family is obligated to help other family members in need, no matter how distant the relationship. Men work together in a communal field and may tend to their personal fields when the shared work is done. All brothers are involved in decision-making. The family or clan chief's authority is incontestable.

Most rural households consist of the father, mother(s), uncles and their wives, sons and their wives, and children. After marriage, young women live with the husband's family. Urban families are generally smaller, composed of a father, mother(s), children, and sometimes cousins. The family structure in rural areas has remained mostly unchanged, while in urban families, sons often move out and live in their own homes.

Family size varies by the family's ethnicity, location, and lifestyle. Malians in the south, like the Songhai, tend to have large families so that children may help with farming, while

nomadic families in the north, like those among the Tuareg, Bozo, and Peul ethnicities, have fewer children. Polygamous families are much larger, with children numbering in the high teens or above. Most women have an average of five or six children.

### **Parents and Children**

In rural areas, all adult family members may educate, discipline, and care for any child, as children are considered the responsibility of the whole community. Children are expected to show unconditional respect for parents. In return, parents are to provide children with protection, advice, and behavioral instruction. Many Malians believe children are never too old to be advised by their parents. A common Malian adage says, "Okra cannot be too tall for the one who wants to pick its fruit."

Most Malian children assume chores by age five: boys assist their fathers and brothers in the field or tend the livestock; girls make flour by pounding millet and corn. Girls also look after younger siblings and perform household chores, such as retrieving water. Most young girls learn how to cook; not doing so is considered shameful. Babies receive a lot of affection, and older children care for younger ones when parents are busy working.

Daughters live with their parents until they get married, though some young women may stay with relatives while looking for a spouse. The oldest son becomes the chief of the family when the father passes away. Adult sons often work outside the home village to help support their families and are valued over other children for their efforts. Young women may work as housemaids so they can purchase personal items.

### **Gender Roles**

Men are considered the head of the home and the main decision makers. Men are responsible for providing for the needs of the family, paying the bills, and making repairs to the home. Women take care of the cleaning, cooking, and child rearing. Rural women often maintain the home as well as work in the fields.

A growing number of women are pursuing employment outside the home as small business owners, selling produce, milk, vegetables, shea butter, and even art. Urban women are able to work at stores, salons, and sewing or fabric-dyeing workshops. Some women also work in government offices, restaurants, and in other private companies. Women who have careers outside the home often hire maids to assist them in the housework. Few women hold leadership positions, as many men are unwilling to recognize women as their superiors. Despite an increasing role in the public sphere, women remain underemployed. Women also have limited access to education. Domestic violence is prevalent throughout Mali. In 2015, Mali adopted a law requiring at least 30 percent of elected or appointed officials to be women.

## **Housing**

### **Rural**

In rural areas, extended families live in large compounds, often with young married couples and young single men living in their own annexed hut, or *du fitini*, next to the compound. Compounds contain houses for each nuclear family, as well as cooking huts (*gwabougu*), storage huts,

granaries, and a well, all surrounded by a wall. The design of the houses varies by region: in the south, houses are usually square; in the north, houses tend to be round. Houses are made of bricks comprised of straw, manure, and mud, which are covered in another layer of mud used as plaster. Roofs are made of corrugated tin or sticks covered with mud. These structures suffer great damage during the rainy season; each year, owners must re-thatch leaky roofs and rebuild walls.

Interior walls are usually painted a shade of blue and decorated with calendars and posters of famous people. Few modern conveniences are available, and homes tend to be furnished simply with bamboo or wood chairs, a small table in the middle of the room, a bamboo bed, and a radio. Bedrooms may also contain mats for sleeping and mosquito nets. Electrical power comes from generators, purchased by a group of villagers, or solar energy.

### **Urban**

Over half of urban Malians live in slums that grow on the edge of cities. In urban areas, a compound may consist of several apartments surrounding a central courtyard with a well. Urban homes are smaller than rural homes, having between two and four bedrooms located close together. Bedrooms typically have one large bed, and clothes may be stored in a wardrobe, in baskets, or on hooks. Bedroom doors open onto a corridor that leads to the living room. Bathrooms are either located inside or outside the home. Living rooms are usually carpeted and contain armchairs, a small table, and a TV. Most urban kitchens have a refrigerator, and wealthy families may have two.

Houses are constructed out of cement bricks, with corrugated tin or concrete roofs. Home exteriors are usually painted in blue, yellow, white, or gray, as are interior walls. Exterior doors and walls may have paintings of animals or geometric shapes drawn on them. Most homes have a narrow courtyard containing flowers and animals. Interior walls are usually decorated with family photos. The majority of homes have electricity and modern conveniences.

### **Home Life**

In rural homes, men usually have a personal room called a *tièso* (Bambara for "man's room") near their bedrooms. The *tièso* is where men keep their personal belongings and receive and entertain male visitors. Visitors may also be hosted outside in the courtyard. Urban homes are often not large enough to have a *tièso*, so men use the family's public living room to host houseguests. Everyone in the family shares the living room. The kitchen is the domain of the women, and most men do not enter the kitchen. Women tend to spend the daytime working in the main compound and the nighttime in their annexed compound.

The space in rural and urban homes is similarly divided. Parents usually have their own bedroom, male and female children have separate rooms, and if a grandmother lives with her son, she may share a room with young children between the ages of 5 and 10. The father may sleep in the main room as a protector. Girls' rooms are usually located close to the parents' room. Boys' rooms tend to be built apart from the parents' and girls' rooms; the kitchen may also separate the two rooms. Bathrooms are usually built in front of the boys' room. In rural areas, male children age 15 to 20 do not usually

live in the shared compound. Instead, they live in rooms they share with other male relatives or friends. The well is usually built in the middle of the compound.

#### **Ownership**

In Mali, men are the primary homeowners. Home ownership is considered a great personal achievement, as homeowners are considered successful. Malian men usually build only one house in their lifetime. Most men do not take out loans from banks to build their homes but instead build them little by little over a span of several years. Wealthy men usually hire professional builders to construct their homes. In rural areas, building a home is less expensive and easier because there is more land available. In the urban areas, the majority of the population rents apartments.

### **Dating and Marriage**

#### **Dating and Courtship**

Dating precedes most marriages in urban as well as rural areas. Many Malian youth begin dating between the ages of 15 and 16, though some couples may be more secretive about their relationships than others. Couples may meet at school, at social gatherings, at work, or on the streets in their neighborhoods. Relationships begin after the young man has secured the girl's affection and the couple begins to see each other in one-on-one meetings. Throughout courtship, young men offer gifts (sometimes money) to their girlfriends. Urban couples often spend time together at nightclubs, theaters, concerts, and bars.

Islam and traditional values prohibit any sexual relationships between unmarried men and women, and parents used to strictly discourage their children from dating. Today, relationships among youth tend to be tolerated, but parents continue to discourage premarital sexual relationships, as virginity is a valued characteristic of a bride. Most romantic relationships are expected to end in marriage.

#### **Engagement**

When a young man decides to propose marriage, his parents send a *griot* (a traditional orator) to speak to the parents or the uncle of the young woman. This practice is common in both rural and urban areas, though urban couples are more likely to have dated before the proposal. If the parents are willing to offer their daughter to the suitor, they will discuss the dowry amount with the *griot*.

Dowry prices vary by ethnicity and region. In northern Mali, the Songhai and the Fulani generally ask for cows and a large amount of money. In Bambara, especially in rural villages, dowries tend to be less expensive but usually include money and goats. In Bamako, a cosmopolitan city where different ethnicities live, the dowry may include a sum of money and a basket of kola nuts. Mothers provide a trousseau, or a gift of bowls, bed sheets, curtains for the doors and windows, an oven, a cooking pot, and all the utensils, for their daughters. During the dry season, some rural young women move to the cities to work and earn enough to help their mothers buy the trousseau.

Though the practice is declining, in the Bwa area, engagements traditionally begin when a young man "kidnaps" a young woman, after obtaining her consent, and hides her in his uncle's or another relative's home. The young woman's

parents are then notified of the proposal and are offered gifts of fabric or money. If, after a negotiation, they formally accept the gifts, it means they consent to the engagement.

In rural areas, engagements may last nine months to one year: couples get engaged by the end of the rainy season (September), and the wedding takes place before the new rainy season (June). Urban engagements may last longer.

#### **Marriage in Society**

Marriage is a valued institution that provides men and women with a way to change their social status. Marriage is believed to be one of the most important events in a person's life. Married individuals are often considered more reliable and trustworthy than single people. In rural areas, men usually marry in their mid-twenties, and women marry in their mid- to late teens. Urban men tend to marry later in life, in their late twenties to mid-thirties, after they have achieved financial stability; urban women marry in their mid- to late twenties, after they have completed their education. Many women look forward to marriage and hope to have a good husband and in-laws. Men prefer to marry as soon as they are financially able. Family members may become worried about young men if they wait too long to marry.

Traditionally, marriages were arranged by parents. This would usually happen in May, about a month before the rainy season. In northern Mali, parents still arrange and sometimes force their children into marriage. Today, love between the couple and a woman's consent are becoming more important than the will of the family when initiating marriage. However, one's social status, ethnicity, and religion also play a role in whom someone can marry. For example, according to Islamic law, a Muslim woman cannot marry a Christian man. And according to tradition, a noble cannot marry a *griot*.

Polygamy is a cultural custom prevalent in both villages and cities. Animist men may marry as many wives as they would like, while Islam allows Muslim men to have up to four wives. Because of financial concerns, most men prefer monogamy. However, some men marry more wives in order to gain more respect. Marriages between cousins are commonly practiced by the Songhai, Peul, and southern Malians. Sexual relations between same-sex partners are legal, but same-sex marriages are not legally recognized in Mali.

#### **Weddings**

In Mali, there are three types of wedding ceremonies: civil, religious, and traditional. In urban areas, all ceremonies are celebrated on the same day. Rural weddings focus more on traditional celebrations. A typical urban wedding day, usually a Thursday or Sunday, starts around 8:30 a.m., when guests meet at the groom's home and accompany the bride and groom to the mayor's office. In the afternoon, the religious wedding is held, and the traditional wedding celebration follows.

Most rural wedding celebrations last a whole week, though Peul celebrations last three days. Depending on the social and financial position of the bride and groom's families, wedding festivities vary. Wealthy families organize large parties with lots of food, like *zamè* (cooked red rice served with vegetables and beef) and *juka* (a brown, couscous-like grain grilled with peanut powder and served with an onion,

eggplant, and beef soup). In the north, different foods may be served instead, including couscous with tomato soup and beef or *alabadia* (cooked rice mixed with ground meat and butter). People are usually given soda and local juices to drink.

Musical groups and singers are often invited to perform for guests, who usually give the performers money for praising them in their music. Men and women usually celebrate separately; men drink tea while women dance together. Elderly guests wear traditional clothing such as *bazin* (a colorful, waxy fabric worn during special occasions). Men wear embroidered, long-sleeve *boubou* (long, flowing robes) and pants, while women wear skirts or embroidered short-sleeve *bazin boubou*. Young men usually wear Western-style coats, shirts, and pants.

#### **Divorce**

In the past, divorce was not common, but that is changing. Divorce is more common in urban areas than rural areas. Though divorce is viewed as a couple's inability to overcome hardship, divorced women usually receive the majority of the blame for the marriage's failure and are more stigmatized than men. Relatives often try to reconcile the couple before divorce is considered. In northern Mali, the stigma of divorce is less severe. Most divorced men and women try to marry again as soon as they can.

### **Life Cycle**

#### **Birth**

Traditions and ceremonies surrounding the birth of a child vary by ethnicity, religion, and region. Pregnancy is not announced publicly, and women tend to wait until they are further along before having their mothers or a close relative announce it to a group of female relatives. After the pregnancy is announced, women sing together, and then the father slaughters a goat or chicken and cooks the entrails to feed to the expectant mother.

Due to limited access to healthcare facilities, most women do not receive prenatal care during their pregnancy, especially in rural areas. Women care for themselves by avoiding certain foods, like snake and fish. Pregnant women are encouraged not to eat, bathe, or sleep outside late at night, as they are considered especially vulnerable to the evil forces that are believed to be more active at night.

After giving birth, women have 40 days to recover, during which they are cared for by their mothers. The new mother's sister or cousin may also move in to help with housework. Friends and relatives visit the mother and newborn as soon as they can, bringing soup and wishing the child a long life. Women may take 14 weeks (6 weeks before the birth and 8 weeks after) of paid maternity leave from their jobs. Fathers have 3 days of paid leave within the first 15 days after the birth of a baby. Usually, the fathers use the leave to assist their wives and to inform their relatives and friends about the birth of the baby.

Muslim Malians invite a Muslim religious leader to come early in the morning and preside over a naming ceremony, which is usually held seven days after the birth. The leader reads from the *Qur'an* (Islamic holy book) and announces the name of the baby, which the parents choose before the ceremony. Some parents may ask the religious leader to

choose a name, which is often taken from the *Qur'an*, according to the day on which the baby was born. After the name is given to the baby, the father sacrifices a ram or goat, and a traditional haircutter shaves the baby's head. The mother of the baby buys silver (for a boy) or gold (for a girl) equivalent to the weight of the hair to make a bracelet for the baby. The bracelet is believed to provide good luck and protection throughout the baby's life.

Animist families do not hold a naming ceremony but may invite friends and relatives over for a party, depending on the father's financial situation. Fathers choose their newborn's name after consulting with close relatives. Most children are named after the family's dearest relatives and friends. The first son is often named after his grandfather and the daughter after her grandmother. Those babies named after their grandparents have nicknames, like Ina, Aba, Papa, Papy, Baba, Boua, Maa, and Mamy, and keep the nicknames throughout their adulthood. In some Bambara animist areas, if a woman gives birth to too many stillborn boys, she and her husband take an oath to name their babies after inanimate objects or sacred trees or mountains.

#### **Milestones**

Socially, girls are considered adults at age 16, and boys at age 18. Legally, they are considered adults at age 18. Birthdays are celebrated by girls more than boys and are similar to Western birthday traditions, including eating cake, gathering with friends, and singing.

Young men may enter adulthood by attending initiation ceremonies into secret societies. In some areas outside of Bamako, traditional circumcision ceremonies are still performed. Boys between the ages of 14 and 17 may go live at an elder's home, where they are taught how to become reputable men in society. After healing, the young men return home and marry in that same year. Old women gather at the houses of the circumcised boys and dance and sing to express their joy for the boy's entry into manhood. During this celebration, the father slaughters a goat. Today, many young men are instead circumcised at a hospital or clinic but still for cultural and religious reasons. Circumcision is seen as a purifying act and is recommended by Islam.

Despite campaigns against female circumcision (also known as female genital mutilation) and its effects on a young woman's reproductive system, many rural and some urban Malians still practice female circumcision. The events surrounding a girl's circumcision are similar to a boy's: elderly women organize dancing parties, and the parents kill a goat during the celebrations. All girls of the same age are usually circumcised in the same year. When they are circumcised, they stay together with the circumciser until they heal. Some community health centers also perform circumcisions.

#### **Death**

When a Muslim dies, the body is washed, wrapped in a white cloth, and buried soon after death. Old men wash the body of a deceased man, while old women wash the body of a deceased woman. Young men are charged with digging the grave as family members gather at the home of the deceased. Men cry silently while women scream and wail, alerting neighbors that there has been a death in the family and they

should offer their condolences. A funeral procession carries the body to the cemetery, where relatives pray for the deceased. Women and young children are not allowed to attend the funeral. At the cemetery, four close relatives lay the body down in the grave and cover it with mud bricks. The grave is then filled with dirt, and the funeral procession returns to the deceased person's home. Funerals usually last a few hours, and relatives may stay with the deceased's family for one to five weeks.

On the seventh and fortieth days after a death, Muslims gather to remember the deceased at a "ceremony of sacrifice." Guests are served kola nuts, candies, beans, and porridge while the *imam* reads verses from the *Qur'an*. Muslim widows observe a fourth-month mourning period, during which they wear blue or white and are not allowed to date or remarry. During times of mourning, other occasions like naming ceremonies and weddings are celebrated more simply.

Upon the death of a Christian, a wake is held overnight in the deceased person's home. A funeral follows the next day, after which comes a burial ceremony in the cemetery.

When an animist passes away, the burial ceremony takes place as soon as the relatives are present. The body is displayed, and friends and relatives pay their final respects and may speak about the good deeds of the deceased person. During this ceremony, guests give money and chickens to the family of the deceased. If the deceased was a hunter, his friends organize a big party at night, during which they speak about his qualities and good deeds. While they are speaking about him, they fire rifles in the air. If the person was the oldest family member or an important person in the community, one to three cows may be slaughtered in his honor. Animists hold commemoration parties on the anniversary of the death of a loved one.

## Diet

The staples of a Malian diet are millet, rice, and corn. A thick porridge called *tô* is prepared using millet, corn, or sorghum flour and is dipped in a peanut, vegetable, or meat sauce. *Tigadegen* (peanut butter sauce) is popular, and meat sauces made of goat, sheep, beef, or chicken might be prepared on special occasions. *Dègè*, a traditional sugary porridge, is also eaten.

In the north, milk, dates, and wheat are important foods. In northern and eastern Mali, *tiordi* (rice cooked with dry fish and spices) is eaten by wealthier families or at celebrations. In rural areas, rice is often expensive and only consumed by wealthy families. *Basi* (couscous) is usually eaten for dinner. For special occasions, *fonio* (a type of grain used to make couscous, bread, and cakes), *zamè* (cooked red rice served with vegetables and beef), and *juka* (a brown, couscous-like grain grilled with peanut powder and served with an onion, eggplant, and beef soup) may be prepared for guests.

Malnutrition is widespread in Mali. During the "hungry season" (July–August), when food stores are depleted and new crops are not ready to harvest, people rely on fresh mangoes and wild fruits to supplement scant meals. Bananas, guavas, pineapples, watermelons, and oranges are also available.

## Recreation

### Sports

The most popular sport in Mali is soccer. Almost every village and city has a soccer team that takes part in local and national competitions. Soccer is an inexpensive spectator sport that provides people the opportunity to sit together and talk while watching the game. Some soccer matches are organized between schools in the same area. Children enjoy playing soccer in and out of school. Large groups of 20 to 25 children may pool their resources and purchase one ball for games.

Basketball, handball, tennis, volleyball, martial arts, and cycling are enjoyed by some urban Malians. Rural women rarely play sports, but urban women sometimes do. Traditional sports include wrestling, horse racing (*soboli*), and canoe racing (*kurunboli*), which are enjoyed during holidays.

### Leisure

Malians often meet together at social clubs, called *grins*, to relax, drink tea, and chat with friends. *Grins* often serve as homes away from home or support groups for their members. Urban Malians may go out to bars, cinemas, concerts, and restaurants for entertainment. Women visit friends or stay at home and enjoy listening to music in either case. Urban youth may attend concerts and cultural events like the Balani Show, street parties where participants dance to the rhythms of traditional and modern music. Rural girls, ages eight to fifteen, may also enjoy dancing at organized moonlit dances (*teguèrètulon*) where they can socialize with girls their same age.

Older men often play cards, checkers, or *mancala* (a catch-and-collect strategy game). During the hot season, some Malians relax under trees; youth enjoy swimming in rivers. Rural youth like to hunt and fish. Rural children create games using sticks, stones, and used tires. Schoolchildren play games similar to Western games like hide-and-seek and capture the flag (*drapeau*).

### Vacation

Most Malians do not take vacations, though children often get time off during holidays. During school breaks, children are sent to visit uncles and aunts or grandparents. The children help in the fields, listen to stories from their grandmothers, and play games. This time is meant to strengthen ties between extended family. Children of wealthy Malians are able to travel to different countries.

## The Arts

Music and dance are a fundamental part of daily life. Most players of traditional music belong to the *griot* (traditional orator), or *djélé*, caste. Each of Mali's regions has its own instruments and musical tradition. For example, in southern Mali the *balophone* (a large wooden instrument similar to a xylophone) is traditional. *Balophones* are handcrafted from a specific type of wood, and *balophone* players are respected in villages for their skill. In the Kayes region, the *tam tam* and *tambours* (African drums) are commonly played. The *ngoni* (lute) is a traditional instrument in the Segou region. In northern regions, stringed instruments and the calabash (a large gourd) are played. Many of Mali's musical forms come



from the Malinké tradition, where women are often the singers. However, Malians have mixed traditional and Western forms of music, such as the blues and Latin rhythms, with great success. Malian musicians have become internationally renowned, many having relocated to France to sign with recording labels.

Considered an architectural wonder, the city of Djenné is built of dried bricks covered in mud-based plaster, the primary elements of traditional Malian architecture. Timbuktu contains much noteworthy architecture in the same style. The art of weaving, much of which is done by a weaver caste, is characterized by its carefully made designs and colors. Mud painted on specially primed fabric creates the *bogolan* (mud cloth), which is often worn in rural areas and only occasionally in urban areas. Wood carving is a prominent folk art, and Malians make exquisitely carved wooden masks. Although masks are used in some areas for animist traditions, they are primarily produced for the tourist market.

### Holidays

National holidays include New Year's Day (1 January), Army Day (20 January), Martyrs' Day (26 March), Labor Day (1 May), and Independence Day (22 September). Islamic religious holidays like *Ramadan* (the Islamic holy month of fasting), *Tabaski* (also known as *Eid al-Adha*, commemorating the prophet Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son), and *al-Mawlid al-Nabawi* (Muhammad's birthday) follow the lunar calendar and change dates accordingly. Most Muslim Malians adjust their work schedules during the month of *Ramadan* so they can celebrate with family. In cities, Christmas and Easter Monday are observed as days off from work.

Popular festivals include an annual Fulani celebration of migratory herding and a festival centered on collective fishing in the Segou region. Other festivals are associated with seasons. Mask dancing is a part of some festivals, with the Dogon Mask Dance being the most famous.

#### *New Year's*

In Mali, New Year's Eve and Day festivities are similar to Western celebrations. This holiday is mainly celebrated by the younger generation. People stay awake all night and wish each other well when midnight arrives. Rural youth celebrate by organizing parties with food and all-night dancing. Women usually prepare meals of chicken and plantains or potatoes for the occasion.

#### *Tabaski*

*Tabaski*, also known as *Eid al-Adha*, honors Abraham for his willingness to sacrifice his son and is one of the most widely celebrated holidays in Mali. *Tabaski* is a three-day feast celebrated on the 10th day of the 11th month of the Islamic (lunar) calendar. During this holiday, Muslims gather together to pray at the mosque, feast, and visit with one another. After prayers at the mosque, a sheep or goat that has been purchased by the head of the family is then sacrificed, and the meat and liver are prepared to eat. Women barbecue and make *zame* (red rice and vegetables or meat) and *fonio* (a type of grain used to make couscous, bread, and cakes) with lots of meat. Young men make tea, while most of the other family members drink soda.

After lunch in the afternoon, adults pay visits to their parents, relatives, neighbors, friends, and colleagues and wish them a happy *Tabaski*. Children may also go door to door to wish their neighbors *Sanbé-Sanbé* (Good feast of *Tabaski*). Neighbors then offer children candies, cookies, or coins. Urban families go to the cinema or to concerts in the afternoon. In rural areas, people organize parties where they can dance and listen to music. *Tabaski* is a busy and sometimes financially stressful time for parents. Women do a lot of cleaning, and men spend between 30,000 and 250,000 CFA francs (US\$60 to \$500) on a ram and must purchase new clothes for each member of the family.

#### *Independence Day*

Every year on 22 September, Malians celebrate the day in 1960 when their country gained independence from France. During this national holiday, the government pays for decorations to be put up in different cities. Malian flags line all the main streets, and tree trunks are painted white.

In the capital city of Bamako, the Boulevard of Independence is the site for celebrations. A large military parade is held, and celebrations are broadcast on television. In each village, families go to the village's public place to watch parades and visit exhibits on their culture and traditional music. The village with the best exhibit is awarded a prize. Youth usually collect money to organize parties on the night before Independence Day. During these parties, youth listen to music, dance, eat, and stay up all night.

## SOCIETY

### Government

#### *Structure*

Mali is a semi-presidential republic. The president is head of state; a prime minister is head of government. The president is elected by popular vote to a maximum of two five-year terms and appoints the prime minister. Mali's legislature is the 147-seat unicameral National Assembly. Its members are elected by popular vote to five-year terms. A Supreme Court is the final court of authority. Local decisions are made by village elders, who often consult under a tree until a consensus is reached.

#### *Political Landscape*

In 2012, due to the handling of the Tuareg rebellion in the northern part of Mali, a coup toppled the democratically elected president. A military junta seized power but eventually relinquished control, restoring the constitution and giving power to the leader of the National Assembly. International donors have pledged significant funds to assist in the rebuilding of government institutions.

Many political parties are active in Mali. The Rally for Mali (RPM) party and its allies currently hold a majority of the seats in the National Assembly. Opposition parties include the Union for the Republic and Democracy (URD) and the Alliance for Democracy (ADEMA).

#### *Government and the People*

The constitution provides for the protection of freedom of speech, assembly, association, religion, and education, which are generally respected. The conflict in the north has limited

the rights and safety of many journalists, activists, and individuals. Public gatherings have been characterized by violence. Though past elections have been considered free and fair by international observers, Malians commonly associate elections with fraud. Distrust of politicians is a common sentiment among most Malians, who tend to place more faith in religious leaders. Voter turnout has risen slightly in recent years but remains below 40 percent. The voting age is 18.

## Economy

Mali is one of the world's poorest countries, and most of its people have little ability to change their circumstances. The average wage earner typically cares for a relatively large number of people; saving money is almost impossible. Eighty percent of the labor force is employed in agriculture; however, most of this is for subsistence alone. Harvests are often affected by drought, locusts, and certain kinds of weeds, and food surpluses are rare. Wage earners usually are government employees, such as teachers. Economic growth is limited by such factors as high population growth, corruption, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient human capital. The country is dependent on foreign aid.

Mali's natural resources are limited to small deposits of gold, limestone, uranium, and other minerals. There is little industry, and the government and foreign corporations control most enterprises. Mali's main exports include cotton, gold, and cattle. Small enterprises are growing, but the purchasing power of the domestic market is limited. Small local efforts in some areas have succeeded in extending loans to women entrepreneurs and in raising revenue to build and staff primary schools. The country benefits from international aid and development projects. Mali uses the currency common to francophone African countries, the *West African CFA franc* (XOF).

## Transportation and Communications

Travel by road is difficult since the only paved road connects the regional capitals. Most rural roads are unpaved and passable only in the dry season. From August to December, the Niger River is usually navigable by larger ships. Canoes and small craft such as the *pinasse*, a covered motorized canoe, navigate the river year-round. Buses link major cities, but outlying areas are usually only accessible by pickup trucks or vans (called SOTRAMA) that carry passengers and their cargo. SOTRAMA vans are the most affordable and travel on fixed routes. Few Malians own cars, as they are expensive and considered a luxury. Most Malians get around on bikes, on mopeds, or on foot. Rural Malians may travel by donkey- or horse-drawn cart. Mali has two international airports and many municipal airports throughout the country.

Television broadcasts can be received in most regions, but access to television and electricity is limited in rural areas. Programs are mostly in French. Radio broadcasts, a main source of news, are in local languages. Several state and private daily newspapers are in circulation. To avoid the threat of fines or harassment, journalists often practice self-censorship. Telephone connections are generally good but not extensive, and landlines are used more by

organizations than by individual families. Due to the inexpensive cost of SIM cards and cellular phones, many Malians own cellular phones. Only a small percentage of the population has internet access. Social media is growing in popularity among intellectuals and students and is accessed mostly by cellular phone users. Mail is delivered to postal and government offices, not to homes. Rural people often send mail with travelers going in the letter's intended direction.

## Education

### Structure

Children between the ages of three and five begin their education at preschool. Primary school begins with first grade at age seven and lasts six years. An additional three years of junior high school is mandatory; however, school attendance is not enforced. Secondary schools are divided into two levels: *lycée* and vocational school. Students must take the *Diplome d'Etudes Fondamentales* (DEF) exams to be admitted into secondary school. While *lycée* students are oriented toward higher education and prepare to take the baccalaureate exam, which qualifies them for admittance into a university, vocational students study subjects like agriculture, carpentry, secretarial studies, and public works.

Some children (mostly boys) attend Qur'anic schools during their school vacations, in order to learn how to read verses from the *Qur'an* (Islamic holy book). Unlike *Qur'anic* schools, *madrasahs* are private schools that follow a formal curriculum and teach Arabic.

Parents are responsible for sending their children to school. Throughout the country, public schools are most common, but in Bamako private schools dominate. Catholic, U.S., and French schools also serve urban areas. Rural Catholic or Protestant missions usually include a school. Students must study at least two years at vocational schools to work in skilled professions. Professional training is relatively rare. Relatively few adults can read or write in French or Bambara.

### Access

Public education is free from primary school through the university level, but overall access to education is limited by fees for school materials and fees to pay the teacher's salary. School uniform fees may be required at certain private schools. Because of these fees, schooling is unaffordable for many children.

The use of French as the language of instruction also limits access for students who do not speak French. Other factors, such as the lack of adequate school materials, a shortage of competent teachers, low teacher salaries, and parents' lack of interest in their children's education also make school attendance difficult for some. Only about half of Malian children complete primary school, and enrollment drops even further in secondary school. However, some progress is being made. A rising literacy rate is linked to higher rural enrollment in locally built primary schools.

Urban Malians recognize the importance of education and do their best to enroll their children in school. In rural areas, education is seen as a long-term investment without guaranteed results. Many fear their children will spend 12 years studying but will not be able to find a job when they

finish. In rural areas, young women struggle to finish secondary school due to early marriages, responsibilities at home, and the necessity of earning a living; urban young women are more likely to complete their education. Most nomadic people, like the Tuareg, Arabs, Peul, and Bozo, do not enroll their children in school unless they settle in an area for a long time. Literacy rates among Mali's nomadic groups are low.

**School Life**

In primary schools, mathematics, history, geography, natural sciences, and French are the main subjects. In secondary school, students study the same subjects as primary school but have the option to study a second language, like Arabic, English, German, Russian, or Spanish. French has long been the language of instruction, though many national languages are being used in schools as well. In rural areas, students with varying knowledge levels study in the same class.

Teaching style is based on memorization, and students may be asked to recite previous lessons in front of the class. Most Malian students do not study outside of school unless it is for an upcoming exam. Students are evaluated by monthly (in first to sixth grade) or quarterly exams (in seventh to ninth grade). Cheating on exams is widespread, despite being socially unacceptable. Parents are rarely involved in their children's education beyond enrolling children in school and paying school fees. In some cases, aunts and uncles may be more involved in the child's education than the natural mother and father, as a child's upbringing is considered the responsibility of the entire family.

Students address their teacher as *Monsieur* (French for "Mr.") or *Madame* (French for "Mrs."). In the past, the student-teacher relationship was based on fear and respect. Today, students are less formal with their teachers and may joke and socialize with them outside of school. Mali has more male teachers than female teachers, as men have more higher education opportunities.

**Higher Education**

Admission into Mali's higher education institutions depends on a student's baccalaureate exam score. University education is free, and the government provides students with money for books. The University of Bamako offers bachelor degrees in a number of disciplines. Mali also has many private universities.

Private universities tend to offer a higher quality of education, while public universities face challenges like overcrowding, lack of materials, and frequent student and teacher strikes. Students choose their majors when they are at university. Many students choose vocational schooling over universities because they lack the family and financial support to attend school in large cities.

**Health**

Medical facilities and services are inadequate or nonexistent in much of the country. On average, there is about one doctor for every 10,000 people. Clinics often are without staff or supplies. Hospitals in the regional capitals have inadequate equipment. Widespread epidemics of malaria cause several thousand deaths each year. HIV/AIDS, influenza, tuberculosis, dysentery, venereal disease, guinea worm, and

German measles cause frequent sickness. Yellow fever, cholera, bilharzia, and rabies are also present. Blindness is common; trachoma, a disease that can cause blindness, affects many Malian children. Public hygiene is poor in urban areas, where sewage collects in open gutters. For most of the population, potable water is available only from deep, hand-powered pump wells.

**AT A GLANCE**

**Contact Information**

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**Country and Development Data**

Capital	Bamako
Population	20,741,769 (rank=61)
Area (sq. mi.)	478,841 (rank=23)
Area (sq. km.)	1,240,192
Human Development Index	186 of 189 countries
Gender Inequality Index	155 of 162 countries
GDP (PPP) per capita	\$2,100
Adult Literacy	40% (male); 22% (female)
Infant Mortality	60.64 per 1,000 births
Life Expectancy	57 (male); 60 (female)
Currency	West African CFA Franc

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