

# Congo

## Culture Name

Congolese

## Orientation

**Identification.** The Kongo Kingdom was one of the great early empires in central Africa. That kingdom is the source of the official name of the Republic of Congo.

**Location and Geography.** The land area is 132,046 square miles (approximately 342,000 square kilometers). The equator passes through the country, which has one hundred miles (161 kilometers) of coastline on the Atlantic Ocean. The nation borders the [Angola](#) enclave of Cabinda, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, the [Democratic Republic of the Congo](#), and Gabon.

The four major topographic regions are a coastal plain that reaches forty miles into the interior, a fertile valley in the south-central area, a central plateau between the Congo and Ogooue rivers, and the north Congo Basin. Most of the country is covered by dense tropical forest. The climate is humid and hot, with heavy rainfall.

The Congo River forms the eastern and southern borders and is one of the most important natural resources. The local peoples have long used the river for food, transportation, and electricity. The river flows between Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Brazzaville, the capital and largest city of the Republic of the Congo.

**Demography.** The population was estimated at 2.8 million in 2000. About 60 percent of the people live in urban areas, particularly Brazzaville and Pointe Noire. Another 12 percent live along the main railway between those cities. The remainder of the population resides in isolated rural areas.

**Linguistic Affiliation.** French is the official language and is used in governmental activities. [Lingala](#) and Monokutuba are commonly spoken trade languages. Over sixty local languages and dialects are spoken, the most widely used of which are Kikongo, Sangha, and Bateke. A talking drum language developed in the villages as a form of

long-distance communication. Specific beats are broadcast for marriages, deaths, births, and other information.

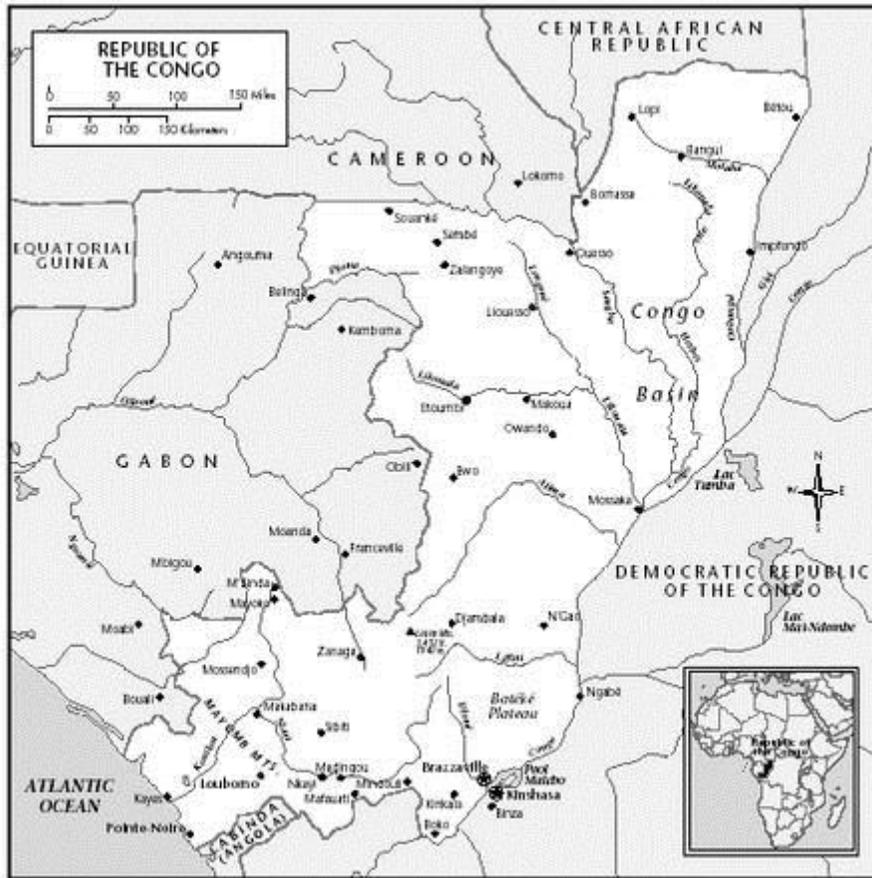
**Symbolism.** For the residents, the mythology of the region is tied closely to the mystical powers of animals. Families take a specific animal spirit to represent them and often raise totem poles to signify this event.

## History and Ethnic Relations

**Emergence of the Nation.** The first inhabitants are believed to have been forest dwellers such as the Teke. Other ethnic groups joined them to form the three kingdoms that ruled the area before the arrival of Europeans: the Kongo, Loango, and Teke. The mouth of the Congo River was the base for the Kongo Kingdom which encountered the Portuguese in 1484. Trading contracts gave the Congolese textiles, jewelry, and manufactured goods in return for ivory, copper, and slaves. Western education and Christianity were introduced into the region at that time.

The Portuguese did not venture into the interior but bought goods and slaves through African brokers on the coast. When the slave trade diminished because of depopulation, the Portuguese bought slaves from other tribes. Fighting between the tribes weakened them as a group, including the Kongo. This increased the power of the Europeans and strengthened the slave trade. This situation continued until the European powers outlawed slavery in the late 1800s.

The Teke Kingdom of the interior signed a treaty with the French in 1883 that gave the French land in return for protection. Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza



*Republic of Congo*

oversaw French interests. A small settlement along the Congo River was renamed Brazzaville and became the capital of the area now called the Middle Congo.

Gabon, the Central African Republic, and Chad were combined with Middle Congo to become French Equatorial Africa in 1910. French citizenship was granted to local residents in 1946. In 1956, the Republic of Congo and the other three countries became autonomous members of the French Community.

**National Identity.** Internal [self-government](#) was achieved in 1958 as a stage in a series of reforms that started in the mid-1940s. In 1960, the Republic of Congo became an independent nation. The new nation maintained its ties with the French community both economically and politically.

**Ethnic Relations.** There are fifteen main ethnic groups and seventy-five subgroups. The largest ethnic groups are the Bakongo (48 percent of the population), the Sangha (20 percent), the Teke (17 percent), and the M'Bochi (12 percent). The Teke group

suffers from widespread discrimination from all the other ethnic groups in Central Africa because they are unorganized forest dwellers with little political power.

## Urbanism, Architecture, and the Use of Space

The Republic of Congo is one of the most urbanized countries in Africa, with almost two-thirds of the population living in the urban conglomeration from Brazzaville to Pointe Moiré. Urban houses are made of concrete, often with a small garden attached. Villages are arranged with one large dirt street in the middle and many smaller streets running perpendicular to it. Many houses are built of mud brick with [thatched](#) or metal roofs. Cooking takes place in the front of the house, along with social interaction.

## Food and Economy

**Food in Daily Life.** The rain forest soil is not nutrient-rich; less than 3 percent of the land is cultivated for food production. Meat is expensive because it has to be hunted or imported. For this reason, little meat is eaten. Bananas, pineapples, taro, peanuts, manioc, cassava, rice, and bread are the staples.

**Food Customs at Ceremonial Occasions.** Food taboos depend on the tribe and village. If a family has a totem, it cannot eat that animal, which is considered a spiritual protector. At major festivals, meat, usually chicken, is eaten. Plum wine and beer are consumed at these times.

**Basic Economy.** Agriculture, industry, and services dominate the economy. The most important products are lumber, plywood, sugar, cocoa, coffee, diamonds, and especially oil.

**Land Tenure and Property.** Under communist rule, the government was the owner of all commercial property. After the civil war, privatization was decreed. Almost 90 percent of homes are now owned by individuals or families.

**Commercial Activities.** Minor agricultural products and light manufactured goods are sold in informal street markets.

**Major Industries.** The major industry is petroleum extraction. Cement kilning, forestry, brewing, sugar milling, palm oil, soap, and cigarette making also are important industries.

**Trade.** The largest export partner is the United States, followed by Belgium and Luxembourg, Taiwan, and China. Oil accounted for 50 percent of the gross national

product in 1997. Imported items include manufactured goods, capital equipment, petroleum products, construction materials, and food. These items are imported from France, Italy, the United States and the United Kingdom. The country is deeply in debt.

## Social Stratification

**Classes and Castes.** Under communism, urban and educated people had jobs and could make more money than rural people, who had a lifestyle closer to that of the ethnic tribes. Discrimination against the pygmies, known as Teke, Aka, or forest dwellers, is widespread. They are turned away from hospitals, receive lower pay, and are not represented in the government.

**Symbols of Social Stratification.** Because of communism and local social customs, few people have accumulated personal wealth. General indicators of prosperity are education, large houses, and money.

## Political Life

**Government.** A transitional government has ruled since 1997, when President Denis Sassou-Nguesso forcefully took over the government with the aid of Angolan troops. He defeated Pascal Lissouba, who had won the 1992 elections, the first democratic election in twenty-eight years. Under Lissouba, the government had experienced accusations of mismanagement and conflict with other political parties that led to a civil war.

When Sassou-Nguesso regained power, he replaced the constitution of 1992 with the Fundamental Act. This act gave the president the power to appoint all the members of the government and military officers, serve as commander in chief, and direct the policy of the government. Thus, the act created a highly centralized government with the president as the head of state and head of government. The legislative and judicial branches currently exist in a weakened form.

From 1965 to 1990, a Marxist form of government was in place.

**Leadership and Political Officials.** Fubert Youlou became the first president in 1960. Within three years, he was forced to resign because of military and economic pressures. Socialist forces gained strength, and the government nationalized



*Koto men with painted faces. There are fifteen main ethnic groups and seventy-five subgroups.*

economic interests under the second president, Alphonse Massamba-Debat, who was forced out by a military coup in 1968. Major Marien Ngouabi then took over the leadership, establishing a one-party state and a people's republic. In 1977, he was assassinated.

After a short period of military rule, Colonel Joachim Yhomby-Opango was appointed president. He found former president Massamba-Debat and others guilty of planning Ngouabi's assassination. Less than two years after Yhomby-Opango became president, his own party forced him from office.

The presidency was then conferred on Colonel Denis Sassou-Naguesso. Former president Yhomby-Opango was tried for treason and stripped of possessions and power. Sassou-Naguesso served until 1992, when Lissouba was elected. After the civil war, in which Lissouba lost to Sassou-Naguesso, high-level officials, including Lissouba and former Prime Minister Kolelas, left the country, fearing a war-crimes trial.

***Social Problems and Control.*** Civil war and political instability have caused large-scale violence. The rebels were mostly from the south, and nationalist forces came from the north and from neighboring countries. Both national and rebel forces committed summary executions and rapes. Civilians were convicted of being rebels and executed without a trial. Many soldiers on both sides were undisciplined, and mob violence was common. Electricity and the infrastructure were disrupted during the civil war, causing water and food shortages, disease, and displacement that involved almost a third of the population.

**Military Activity.** The military includes trained and untrained soldiers. The available force consists of 641,543 males, about half of whom are fit for service.

## Social Welfare and Change Programs

Internal strife placed international organizations in the lead role in revealing government and human rights abuses. The country began receiving economic and social aid before it became officially independent. International economic aid ended with the onset of the civil war, but local and international [humanitarian](#) groups continued to operate.

## Nongovernmental Organizations and Other Associations

The government has allowed [nongovernmental organizations](#)(NGOs) to operate in some areas. This has given the NGOs considerable power. Among the forty major organizations active in the country are the United Nations, Medecins sans Frontieres, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, the International Monetary Fund, UNESCO, and the World Health Organization. The country is a member of the Organization of African Unity, the Economic Commission for Africa, and the Central African Customs and Economic Union and an associate member of the European Commission.

## Gender Roles and Statuses

**Division of Labor by Gender.** According to the Fundamental Act, discrimination based on race or sex is illegal, and equal pay for equal work is mandated. In the workplace, women are underrepresented. This forces them into the informal sector, where no rules are enforced. Employment benefits are therefore negligible. It is estimated that 51 percent of women are economically active, compared to 84 percent of men. Women accounted for 39 percent of economically active persons in 1990.

Women typically are responsible for labor in and around the house; this includes planting, harvesting,



*A group of women and soldiers during a 1980 visit by Pope John Paul II to Brazzaville, Congo. Roughly 50 percent of Congo natives practice Christianity.*

food preparation, water fetching, minor housework, and child rearing. Men in rural areas hunt; those in urban areas are the family money earners.

***The Relative Status of Women and Men.*** Women are underrepresented in politics and the higher levels of the government. In rural areas, women are often discouraged from attaining paid employment and education at the high school level. They are instead encouraged to focus on family and child-rearing activities. This gives them limited power in social dealings with men, who typically are better educated and have more money. Nongovernmental organizations such as the Ministry of Public Service and the Promotion of Women have started government initiatives to improve the status of women.

## Marriage, Family, and Kinship

***Marriage.*** Traditionally, family members arranged marriages. Today, this is less common, especially in the cities. A practice that dates back to ancient times is the dot, or brideprice. Once price has been set between the two families, the groom must pay it to the wife's family. The dot is often very high.

After the marriage, a ritual is performed to demonstrate the virginity of the bride. The morning after the wedding night, women from both sides of the family go to the couple's bed. Questions are asked about the wedding night, and the presence of blood provides

evidence of virginity. If virginity is not proved, the marriage can be annulled and the groom can ask for the return of the brideprice.

After a divorce the man can ask for his brideprice back. Because most women cannot repay it, divorce is mostly a male option. Polygyny is allowed, but **polyandry** is illegal. Adultery is illegal only for women.

**Domestic Unit.** The concept of the nuclear family does not apply in much of the country. The family includes many relatives, such as grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, nephews, and nieces. The average woman bears five children, although in rural areas the number is often twice that high.

**Inheritance.** The Legal Code states that 30 percent of a husband's estate must go to his widow. Very often this code is not adhered to, and a surviving wife may not get any of her husband's assets.

**Kin Groups.** Many of the ethnic groups, including the Bakongo, are matrilineal. The oldest uncle on



*A group of women holding papal flags and wooden crosses on the streets of Congo.*

the mother's side is considered the most important male and sometimes has more influence over a child's life than does the father. This uncle can be responsible for the child's education, employment, and marriage selection. Cousins on the mother's side are considered siblings. The family is responsible for sick, handicapped, and elderly members. Any care that is needed is distributed throughout the entire family system.

## Socialization

**Infant Care.** The infant mortality rate is high, and for this reason women tend to bear many children. Care of infants is largely a female responsibility, though forest dwellers tend to share parental duties.

**Child Rearing and Education.** For decades, Brazzaville was the capital of education in Central Africa. A mostly urban population and the need for civil servants in a Marxist society fueled the system. The education was of such high quality that neighboring countries sent students to study in the secondary schools and the university. The civil war caused a decline in funding for schools and a subsequent decline in enrollment. Adult literacy is around 70 percent, one of the highest levels in sub-Saharan Africa. There are many rural schools.

**Higher Education.** Marien Ngouabi University is the main center for higher education and once had an enrollment of ten thousand students. Parts of the school were destroyed during the civil war and families that can afford it send their children abroad.

## Etiquette

The Congolese take great pride in their appearance and manner of dress. Regardless of financial status, it is common to wear clean and pressed handmade garments. There is a certain formality in social interactions in both urban and rural areas. An inquiry must be made about one's health and family to indicate the required level of respect. Older people are shown respect through physical gestures, and agreement with them is considered more important than frankness.

## Religion

**Religious Beliefs.** There is no official state religion; the Fundamental Act mandates freedom of religion. About 50 percent of the people are Christian. Forty-eight percent of the people adhere to native religions and the remaining 2 percent are Muslim. Varying combinations of Christianity and [animism](#) have developed. In some rural areas, Christian missionaries have had little success in converting the forest dwellers.

Before the coming of Christianity, all the native religions were animist. The [monotheistic religion](#) of Nzambi is widely practiced among the Bakongo. In this tradition, Nzambi created the world after a great sickness, vomiting first the sun, then the stars, animals, and people. After the creation, he went to live with the ancestral spirits. It is believed that family members join the ancestral world after death to protect the living. In cases of

wrongful or violent death, they roam until retribution has occurred. Medicine and religion are often indistinguishable in the native religions.

## Medicine and Health Care

In 1996, life expectancy was forty-nine years for men and fifty-three years for women. AIDS affected 100,000 residents in 1997. The civil war and the financial crisis have hindered anti-AIDS programs and worsened public health. Sixty percent of the people have access to safe water and immunization, but only 9 percent have access to sanitary services.

## Secular Celebration

The major holidays are Christmas, New Year's, Easter, All Saints Day, National Reconciliation Day (10 June), Tree Day (6 March), and Independence Day (15 August).

## Arts and Humanities

**Literature.** Storytelling is part of the cultural tradition. Since the introduction of written language, novels, plays, and poems have become more popular.

**Performance Arts.** The Congolese are known for their singing. Songs fill the air during the performance of chores and recently have been recorded. Rumba and other forms of music are played with native and Western instruments.

## The State of the Physical and Social Sciences

The civil war has had a deleterious effect on the sciences and education.

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