

1. Description

1.1 Name(s) of society, language, and language family:

Benin, Fon, Niger Congo

1.2 ISO code (3 letter code from ethnologue.com):

fon

1.3 Location (latitude/longitude):

9 30 N, 2 15 E (3)

1.4 Brief history:

“Before 1975, the Republic of Benin was known as Dahomey, its French colonial name. Although several ethnic groups are assumed to be indigenous, migration that began four hundred years ago brought Aja-speaking peoples (the Gbe) into the southern part of the country, where they founded several kingdoms. The Yoruba presence in the southern and central regions also dates back several hundred years. The Portuguese were the first Europeans to make contact at Ouidah (Whydah) in 1580s; Dutch, French, and English traders followed. The coastal communities became part of an emerging trans-Atlantic trading system. In the seventeenth century, slaves became the most important commodity, traded for manufactured items. At first the trade took place with coastal kingdoms, but the interior kingdom of Dahomey later conquered those kingdoms. Although a tributary of the Yoruba kingdom Oyo from 1740 to 1818, Dahomey dominated the regional slave trade. France engaged in three military campaigns against Dahomey, and in 1894 King Behanzin surrendered and was exiled. By 1900, the Bariba had been defeated and the new boundaries had been determined. From 1904 to 1958, Dahomey was a colony in the federation of French West Africa. Colonial rule forced the people to accept a new system of central administration, heavy taxation, forced labor, and harsh laws. France conscripted men to fight in both world wars. By the end of World War II, the economy was weak and growing discontent was difficult to manage. Three years after the coup that brought Major Kérékou to power, the name was changed to the People's Republic of Benin, reflecting the Marxist-Leninist ideology of the new government. After the collapse of the Kérékou government in 1989, the name was shortened to the Republic of Benin.” (1)

1.5 Influence of missionaries/schools/governments/powerful neighbors:

“The French presence and influence increased after 1840 as a result of commercial and missionary activity. About 15 percent of the population is Muslim, and 15 percent is Christian, mostly Roman Catholic. The rest of the population follows indigenous systems of belief. Vodun (voodoo) was taken with the coastal slaves to Brazil and the Caribbean.” (1)

1.6 Ecology (natural environment):

“There are five distinct geographic zones. In the south, coconut palms grow on a narrow coastal strip broken by lagoons and creeks. In the north, a plateau of fertile iron clay soil interspersed with marshy areas supports oil palms. The central area is a wooded savanna with some hilly areas. The Atacora mountain chain in the northwest is the area of greatest elevation, while the northeast is part of the Niger river basin. Most of the country has a tropical climate with a dry season from November to April and a rainy season from May to October. Rainfall and vegetation are heaviest in the south.” (1)

1.7 Population size, mean village size, home range size, density

“The current population is estimated to be about 6.5 million and is concentrated in the southern and central regions.” (1)

“Over 50% of the population speaks Fon” (1)

“The average household contains six persons, but extended families and polygamous households may be much larger. Often close relatives live in the same vicinity in separate households but function as a cooperative economic unit.” (1)

2. Economy

2.1 Main carbohydrate staple(s):

“In the south, rice, corn, and manioc are the primary starches; millet, sorghum, and yams are preferred in central and northern communities. Sauces may contain okra, tomatoes, pumpkin seeds, peanuts, eggplant, peppers, and other vegetables. Legumes may be made into side dishes. In the marshy areas, carrots, green beans, and lettuce are being incorporated into the diet.” (1)

2.2 Main protein-lipid sources:

“Smoked, dried, or fresh fish is likely to accompany a meal in the south, while beef is more common in the north. Goats, sheep, and poultry are found throughout the country. Poor people often eat meals with no protein. "European" foods were introduced during the colonial period.” (1)

2.3 Weapons: Bow and arrow, blowguns?:

In fishing communities nets and fishing rods are used to catch indigenous fish. (1,4)

“The crime rate is low, and most disputes are resolved by local leaders. Few civilians have access to guns.” (1)

2.4 Food storage:

“Because many homes do not have refrigeration, most people go to the market several times a week to purchase food.” (1)

2.5 Sexual division of production:

“In rural areas, the division of labor is usually clearly prescribed, with specific tasks assigned to men and women. Children are expected to help with chores. In polygynous families, the division of labor among cowives is precise. The more senior a wife is, the more likely she is to have time to pursue commercial interests.” (1)

2.6 Land tenure:

“In the precolonial period, access to land was primarily through lineages and clans. However, private holdings existed before the colonial period as a result of gifts from kings to their supporters and purchases from lineage groups.” (1)

2.7 Ceramics:

Ceramics are used in urban and rural settings to transport or store water (4p2)

2.8 Specified (prescribed or proscribed) sharing patterns:

“Offering food and drink to visitors is a key element of hospitality, and to refuse is considered rude.” (1)

2.9 Food taboos:

None found

2.10 Canoes/watercraft?

Fishing communities have canoes (picture) (1)

3. Anthropometry

3.1 Mean adult height (m and f):

Not Found

3.2 Mean adult weight (m and f):

Not Found

4. Life History, mating, marriage

4.1 Age at menarche (f):

Not found

4.2 Age at first birth (m and f):

Not found

4.3 Completed family size (m and f):

Dependent on number of cowives. Each female has between 1-3 children. (1)

4.4 Inter-birth-interval (f):

Not Found

4.5 Age first marriage (m and f):

Some marriages are arranged at birth, and can start when the female reaches puberty. (4p1)

4.6 Proportion of marriages ending in divorce:

“Because wives do not become part of the husband's kin group, marriages tend to be brittle.” (1)

4.7 Percent marriages polygynous, percent males married polygynously:

Traditionally a polygynous society. Women are married into the man's family when the man offers the wives' families payment of cows or food. (1, 4)

4.8 Bride purchase (price), bride service, dowry?:

“Marriage may involve the transfer of money or goods to the bride's family. After a divorce, renegotiation of bridewealth may be necessary, especially if there are no children.” (1)

4.9 Inheritance patterns:

“Patterns of inheritance vary according to the customs of individual groups; while national law permits women to inherit and own land, in patrilineal societies land is likely to be inherited by brothers and sons.” (1)

4.10 Parent-offspring interactions and conflict:

“Children are expected to be obedient and to show respect for their elders. Children learn gender-appropriate tasks early, especially girls. Most children have few toys and amuse themselves with simple games. It is estimated that 8 percent of rural children work as laborers on plantations and as domestic servants.” (1)

4.11 Homosexual activities, social attitudes towards homosexuals:

“Public displays of affection between members of the opposite sex are discouraged, but men frequently walk together holding hands.” (1)

4.12 Pattern of exogamy (endogamy):

Unless prearranged, exogamy and endogamy are equally likely. (2)

4.13 What is the belief of the role of males in conception; is paternity partible? Are these “other fathers” recognized?

One father is recognized in the polygynous household (2, 4)

4.14 What is the belief of the mother's role in procreation exactly? (e.g., “receptacle in which fetus grows”)

Not found

4.15 Is conception believed to be an incremental process (i.e., semen builds up over time)?

Not found

4.16 Occurrence of sexual coercion, rape

“The crime rate is low, and most disputes are resolved by local leaders' (1)

4.17 Preferential category for spouse (e.g., cross cousin)

Not found

4.18 Do females enjoy sexual freedoms?

“Public displays of affection between members of the opposite sex are discouraged, but men frequently walk together holding hands.” (1)

4.19 Evidence of giving gifts to extramarital partners or extramarital offspring

Men will offer gifts of food or animals to attract or buy more wives (1, 4)

4.20 If mother dies, whose raises children?

“Because women marry into a patrilineal descent system, the children belong to the father.” (1)

4.21 Adult sex ratio: number of adult males divided by number of (reproductive) females

“1.04 male(s)/female” (3)

“Total fertility rate: 5.22 children born/woman (2012 est.)” (3)

4.22 Evidence for couvades

Does not occur

4.23 Different distinctions for potential fathers (e.g., lesser/younger vs. major/older)

Not apparent

4.24 Kin avoidance and respect?

“Children are expected to be obedient and to show respect for their elders. Children learn gender-appropriate tasks early, especially girls.” (1)

“The closest ties are between mother and child. Mothers indulge their children, whereas fathers are more remote and strict. A child is treated permissively until about age 2, after which physical punishment and ridicule are used to regulate behavior.” (4p8)

4.24 Joking relationships?

“Mothers indulge their children, whereas fathers are more remote and strict. A child is treated permissively until about age 2, after which physical punishment and ridicule are used to regulate behavior.” (4p8)

4.25 Patterns of descent (e.g., bilateral, matrilineal) for certain rights, names or associations

“Because women marry into a patrilineal descent system, the children belong to the father.” (1)

4.26 Incest avoidance rules

Emphasis on togetherness of family, incest seems to not occur.

4.27 Is there a formal marriage ceremony?

“On obtaining the consent of the girl's parents, a consent-fee called Ijohun is paid by the would-be husband to the family and relatives of the girl thus: One case of gin to the father and his relatives. One case of gin to the mother and her relatives. 6 kola nuts (Obi Ajopa) to the father who distributes them among the relatives. 16 bitter kola nuts (O rogbo).

In all cases before Ijohun ceremony is performed, the family oracles are invariably consulted by the parents of both parties concerned, when all necessary sacrifices are made beforehand. This is called Ebo Iyawo, i.e., a sacrifice concerning the bride elect. The most important part of the ceremony is the splitting and sharing of kola nuts among every member of the girl's family. This seals the contract.” (2p54)

4.28 In what way(s) does one get a name, change their name, and obtain another name?

As a patrilineal society, when the woman marries into a man's family she obtains his name. (4)

4.29 Is marriage usually (or preferred to be) within community or outside community? (m/f difference?)

“The wife joins her husband's family, or the new couple may relocate. Marriage is nearly universal because remarriage occurs quickly after divorce or the death of a spouse.” (1)

4.30 Are marriages arranged? Who arranges (e.g., parents, close kin)?

“In the past, most marriages were arranged by families, but individual choice is becoming more common, especially among the educated elite.” (1).

4.31 Evidence for conflict of interest over who marries who:

“Although cowives in polygamous marriages are supposed to get along, jealousy is not unusual.” (1)

Warfare/homicide

4.14 Percent adult (male) deaths due to warfare:

Homicide rate: 22 per 100,000 (3)

4.15 Outgroup vs ingroup cause of violent death:

Homicide rate: 22 per 100,000 (3)

4.16 Reported causes of in-group and out-group killing:

Not Found

4.17 Number, diversity and relationship with neighboring societies (external relations):

Benin's political system is weak. From 1986-1999 there were 9 different coups and new governments. (3, 4)

4.18 Cannibalism?

Not Present

5. Socio-Political organization and interaction

5.1 Mean local residential (village) group size:

“Agnatically related men often shared the same large compound, taking separate sections for their wives and children.” (4p8)

5.2 Mobility pattern: (seasonality):

High urban population, very few nomadic cultures still exist. (2)

5.3 Political system: (chiefs, clans etc, wealth or status classes):

Status Classes

5.4 Post marital residence:

“The wife joins her husband's family, or the new couple may relocate.” (1)

5.5 Territoriality? (defined boundaries, active defense):

“Agnatically related men often shared the same large compound, taking separate sections for their wives and children.” (4p8)

5.6 Social interaction divisions ? (age and sex):

“In the past, elder males ideally held most positions of civic authority, although senior women were known to do so. Emerging class distinctions are calculated according to wealth, education, and occupation. High prestige also goes to people who are generous, hospitable, and helpful to others.” (4p8)

5.7 Special friendships/joking relationships:

Not found

5.8 Village and house organization:

“The wife joins her husband's family, or the new couple may relocate.” (1)

“Agnatically related men often shared the same large compound, taking separate sections for their wives and children. Each wife had a separate room but cooked for and made conjugal visits to her husband in rotation. Until the age of puberty, children slept in their mothers' rooms; youths moved to a common room, and girls soon moved to the compounds of their husbands.” (4p8)

5.9 Specialized village structures (mens' houses):

Some fishing villages have their houses built on stilts next to the river to avoid flooding problems. (picture) (1)

5.10 Sleep in hammocks or on ground or elsewhere?

It appears they sleep on the ground or on mattresses made of various material (pictures) (1)

5.11 Social organization, clans, moieties, lineages, etc:

“The caste system of social stratification has its roots in the precolonial kingdoms.” (1)

5.12 Trade:

“Cotton, crude oil, palm products, and cocoa are the major exports. Major imports include textiles, machinery, food, and agricultural raw materials. After independence, France continued to be the main destination for exports. Other current trading partners include Brazil, Portugal, Morocco, and Libya. Most people still depend on open-air markets to buy not only food but textiles, clothing, furniture, and manufactured goods. The informal economy is large. Historically, women have played an important role in trade, and many women attempt to engage in commerce in addition to household or wage-earning labor.” (1)

5.13 Indications of social hierarchies?

“The system of social stratification has its roots in the precolonial kingdoms. Kingdoms in the south included royal and commoner families as well as slaves. At the top of the hierarchy was the ruling group of the Bariba, followed by a class of Bariba cultivators. Next came the Fulani pastoralists, and on the bottom were the Gando, the slaves of the Wasangari. Colonization broke the power of the traditional rulers, but social status is still partially determined by a person's family roots. The dress, manners, activities, and worldview of the urban elite set them apart from other segments of society, and their lifestyle often is emulated by people in lower classes. Speaking French, wearing Western-style clothes, eating European foods, living in a house with a tin roof, and listening to modern music distinguish a person who is "civilized."” (1)

6. Ritual/Ceremony/Religion (RCR)

6.0 Time allocation to RCR:

“Christianity was introduced from the south in the mid-nineteenth century; Islam came from the north in the seventeenth or eighteenth century. Yoruba religious allegiances are divided between the two global faiths, yet many simultaneously uphold aspects of the ancient religious legacy. Syncretistic groups also blend Islam or Christianity with Yoruba practices.” (4p7)

6.1 Specialization (shamans and medicine):

“People often employ more than one system of healing. Even those who have access to an infirmary or clinic may visit herbalists or other healers.” (1)

6.2 Stimulants:

Drums and chants were used to become possessed by the warrior God Koku. (5)

6.3 Passage rituals (birth, death, puberty, seasonal):

Rite of passage of the warrior in voodoo practicing communities, “Then, as if heeding some unspoken cue, the warriors begin raking their weapons across their arms. Blood pours from their wounds. It is unbelievable, but I learn that it is designed to show the strength of their faith and the mightiness of their god. Koku guarantees the men protection in battle and invincibility in combat. When the men of Zooti went to war, they wouldn't be afraid. Even if they were wounded they wouldn't feel any pain.” (5)

6.4 Other rituals:

“During betrothal the would-be husband sends a present of not less than nine yams and one hundred ears of corn to the parents of the girl every year as his annual present.” (2p54)

6.5 Myths (Creation):

“In addition to hundreds of anthropomorphic deities, the cosmos contains a host of other supernatural forces.” (4p7)

6.6 Cultural material (art, music, games):

“Life-size bronze heads and terracottas, sculpted in a classical style between A.D. 1000 and 1400 and found at the ancient city of Ife, have been widely exhibited. Other art forms are poetry, myth, dance, music, body decoration, weaving, dyeing, embroidery, pottery, calabash carving, leather- and beadworking, jewelry making, and metalworking.” (4p9)

6.7 Sex differences in RCR:

Both sexes were noted and shown in voodoo rituals.

6.8 Missionary effect:

“Priests and priestesses exercised considerable influence in pre-colonial times. They were responsible for divining, curing, maintaining peace and harmony, administering war magic, and organizing extensive rites and festivals. Many duties of political and religious authorities overlapped.” (4p8)

6.10 Death and afterlife beliefs:

“In indigenous belief systems, ancestors are considered to remain part of the community after death. Among the Fon, circular metal sculptures on staffs called *asen* are made for each deceased person and kept in the family compound.” (1)

6.11 Taboo of naming dead people?

Not Noted

6.12 Is there teknonymy?

Not noted

6.13 Briefly describe religion (animism, ancestor worship, deism, magic, totems etc.)

“Rituals are focused on the explanation, prediction, and control of mystical power. In addition to hundreds of anthropomorphic deities, the cosmos contains a host of other supernatural forces. Mystical power of a positive nature is associated with ancestors, the earth, deities of place (especially hills, trees, and rivers), and medicines and charms. Power of an unpredictable, negative nature is associated with a trickster deity; with witches, sorcerers, and their medicines and charms; and with personified powers in the form of Death, Disease, Infirmity, and Loss. Individuals inherit or acquire deities, through divination or inspiration.” (4p9)

7. Adornment

7.1 Body paint:

None found

7.2 Piercings:

Wide ear piercings were in a few photos (5)

7.3 Haircut:

Based on photos, men traditionally have short shaved hair and women grew their hair out or sometimes were bald. (1,2,4,5)

7.4 Scarification:

In voodoo practicing communities, “...as if heeding some unspoken cue, the warriors begin raking their weapons across their arms. Blood pours from their wounds. It is unbelievable, but I learn that it is designed to show the strength of their faith and the mightiness of their god. Koku guarantees the men protection in battle and invincibility in combat. When the men of Zooti went to war, they wouldn't be afraid. Even if they were wounded they wouldn't feel any pain.” (5)

7.5 Adornment (beads, feathers, lip plates, etc.):

Lip rings and wide ear piercings were evident in pictures (1,2,5)

7.6 Ceremonial/Ritual adornment:

Men carried drums and metal knives (5)

7.7 Sex differences in adornment:

Men and women participated in the voodoo practices. They wore respective gender clothing. (Pictures) (5)

7.8 Missionary effect:

“Priests and priestesses exercised considerable influence in pre-colonial times. They were responsible for divining, curing, maintaining peace and harmony, administering war magic, and organizing extensive rites and festivals. Many duties of political and religious authorities overlapped.” (4p8)

7.9 Cultural revival in adornment:

Not Found

8. Kinship systems

8.1 Sibling classification system:

Not Found

8.2 Sororate, levirate:

“Because women marry into a patrilineal descent system, the children belong to the father. Because wives do not become part of the husband's kin group, marriages tend to be brittle.” (1)

8.3 Other notable kinship typology, especially cross-cousin (MBD/FZD) typology (Crow/Hawaiian/Omaha etc.):

Not Found

9. Other interesting cultural features (list them):

“Offering food and drink to visitors is a key element of hospitality, and to refuse is considered rude. Many people eat in the traditional style, using the fingers of the right hand. It is considered bad taste to eat with the left hand or offer another person something with it.” (1)

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