

1. Description

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

Fon; language: Fon, language family: Gbe (1)

1.2 ISO code (3 letter code from ethnologue.com): [fon] (14)

1.3 Location (latitude/longitude): Southern Benin, Togo (West Africa). (1) 9° 30' 0" N / 2° 15' 0" E (6)

1.4 Brief history:

“The Fon kingdom of Dahomey, which was ruled by the kings of the Alladahonu dynasty for over 200 years, reached its political and economic peak between the early 18th and the mid 19th centuries. After conquering numerous small coastal states, the Fon monopolized the region’s slave trade resulting in phenomenal economic gains. The income helped to support the wealth of the King whose power was absolute.” The French took over the people in 1892, and the area was renamed Benin in 1894. It then became a colony of France under the name of Dahomey. (1) It then became an “autonomous republic within the French Community in 1958,” then in 1960, granted independence. In 1965 Gen. Christophe Soglo declared himself chief of state, disposing of the civilian government. Throughout the proceeding years the country was in a power struggle between civilian and military rule. It then embraced socialism between 1974 and 1989, changing the name to the People’s Republic of Benin. Then in 1990, moved towards multiparty democracy, changing its name to the Republic of Benin. (7) “Because many Fon people were victims of the slave trade, they are scattered across West Africa and the American continent. Some Fon people can also be found in Europe, particularly France. As a result of migration, many Fon people now live in America and Europe. The Fon built the cities of Abomey, Dahomey and Quidah, which became major cities of the slave trade. (11). The majority of self-recognizing Fon live in Benin today.

1.5 Influence of missionaries/schools/governments/powerful neighbors: The French took colonized the region and had major impact on the people “When the French arrived in Benin they brought with them many new concepts. For example, a concept that the Fon people had never heard of before the Europeans arrived was ice and snow. Because it is so hot in Benin, there is never natural ice. Before the Europeans arrived, they did not have freezers so in Fon they usually just use the French word "glace" and "neige" for ice and snow.”

(2) The government of the Fon people is a Republic under a multiparty democratic rule. (7)

Many Fon have converted to Christianity. They were one of the first groups to accept Christianity in Africa given their proximity to the coast. However, the majority of the people practice Vodun. Some combine beliefs of both religions. (3)

1.6 Ecology (natural environment): The environment of Benin is tropical. (5) “This West African nation on the Gulf of Guinea, between Togo on the west and Nigeria on the east, is about the size of Tennessee. It is bounded by Burkina Faso and Niger on the north. The land consists of a narrow coastal strip that rises to a swampy, forested plateau and then to highlands in the north. A hot and humid climate blankets the entire country.” (7) “The southern zone has an equatorial type of climate with four seasons – two wet and two dry. The principal rainy season occurs between mid-March and mid-July; the shorter dry season lasts to mid-September; the shorter rainy season lasts to mid-November; and the principal dry season lasts until the rains begin again in March. The amount of rain increases toward the east. Grand-Pop receives only about 32 inches (800 millimeters) a year, whereas Cotonou and Porto-Novo both receive approximately 50 inches. Temperatures are fairly constant, varying between 72 degrees and 93 degrees F, and the relative humidity is often uncomfortably high.” (19)

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

population size: 3,500,000 (4) Majority of Fon live in villages and small towns in mud houses with corrugated iron gable roofs.

2. Economy

2.1 Main carbohydrate staple(s): maize, okra, sesame, millet (1)

2.2 Main protein-lipid sources: Sorghum, cattle (beef) (1)

2.3 Weapons: Bow and arrow, blowguns?: Part of Benin, developed country. Individuals do not use outdated weaponry.

2.4 Food storage: “The agricultural economy is based on the sale of yams, cotton, and taro, but the Fon also grow sorghum, sesame, millet, palms, maize and okra for personal consumption. Cattle are kept, and they represent a man’s wealth.” (4)

2.5 Sexual division of production: “Some hunting is done by the men, although much of the meat is sold rather than consumed by the hunter’s family.” (1) “Fon women are mostly responsible for the market place and craftwork while the men engage in fishing and farming. The traditional Fon economy is based on agriculture. The main crops are corn, cassava and palm oil and yams. Men have the role of clearing and hoeing the fields while both men and women plant. Tending and harvesting of the crops is done by women.” (11) Fon men are usually fishermen or farmers. Women help out after men have done physically strenuous labor. Women are also responsible for the market work and build materials for the construction of homes. (11) “[Fon] have a very structured society in which the man’s and the woman’s responsibilities are well known. The women make material to build huts, care for butchered meat, and carry out most agricultural work. They are also in charge of market work.” (4)

2.6 Land tenure: Land settlement and rights of various individuals to land are generally supported by relations based on kinships. (15)

2.7 Ceramics: “Markets are held every fourth day throughout the region for the local distribution of agricultural products and local crafts.” (1) When the Fon people were once part of the kingdom of Dahomey, they (as well as their neighbors) were well known for ceramic art. These arts were typically designed to praise the deities of their Vodun religion (18). “Ceramic sculptural pots are an important component of the visual culture of Anlo-Ewe Vodun (meaning ‘gods’ or ‘spirits’), yet they have received surprisingly little

attention in the literature (Herskovits 1938; Hubner 1995; Savary 1970), most of it focused on the names of the pots and their ritual associations rather than production and marketing.” (18)

2.8 Specified (prescribed or proscribed) sharing patterns: Land/food shared with family. Family responsibilities were shared. All members of family were expected to raise children.

2.9 Food taboos: No evidence supporting food taboos for the Fon people.

2.10 Canoes/watercraft? Fon fishermen use canoes (11)

3. Anthropometry

3.1 Mean adult height (m and f): undocumented

3.2 Mean adult weight (m and f): undocumented

4. Life History, mating, marriage

4.1 Age at menarche (f): undocumented

4.2 Age at first birth (m and f): undocumented

4.3 Completed family size (m and f): undocumented

4.4 Inter-birth-interval (f): undocumented

4.5 Age first marriage (m and f): undocumented

4.6 Proportion of marriages ending in divorce: 39.2% (8)

4.7 Percent marriages polygynous, percent males married polygynously: “Fon men are allowed to have more than one wife, but if this privilege is abused, the wife is free to divorce and remarry.” (9)

4.8 Bride purchase (price), bride service, dowry?: men cannot refuse a wife offered to him (9) “prestigious marriage includes payments by the groom to the bride’s father or premarital farm labor performed by a man for his future father-in-law. Such bride-wealth or work gives a man control over his children. When this is not performed, the mother and her family have all rights over the children; thus, this sort of marriage is less desirable or prestigious for a husband. Herskovits (1938) (10)

4.9 Inheritance patterns: Land is inherited from fathers to sons (8)

4.10 Parent-offspring interactions and conflict: Entire families, especially parents often interact with children. Family bonds are strong, so if conflict arises, it is generally resolved. Family unit is important to Fon culture.

4.11 Homosexual activities, social attitudes towards homosexuals: Many Fon are Christian and adhere to Christian stance on issue. No evidence of Vodun stance on homosexuality. However, in the country of Benin (where the majority of Fon reside) same-sex sexual acts are legal, however, they do not have the same legal rights as opposite sex couples.

4.12 Pattern of exogamy (endogamy): no evidence found.

4.13 What is the belief of the role of males in conception; is paternity partible? Are these “other fathers” recognized? No, men can have multiple wives, but women cannot marry multiple men.

4.14 What is the belief of the mother’s role in procreation exactly? (e.g., “receptacle in which fetus grows”) – no evidence suggesting farfetched beliefs on conception

4.15 Is conception believed to be an incremental process (i.e., semen builds up over time)? No; modern views on conception.

4.16 Occurrence of sexual coercion, rape: Undocumented

4.17 Preferential category for spouse (e.g., cross cousin) – Fon do not engage in cross cousin marriage, preferences based on wealth.

4.18 Do females enjoy sexual freedoms? No, however women can divorce men upon her family’s request (9) However, today it is more acceptable that couples become intimate before arranging marriages, but Christian Fon proceed according to the arrangements prescribed in their churches. (10).

4.19 Evidence of giving gifts to extramarital partners or extramarital offspring – no evidence supporting this

4.20 If mother dies, whose raises children? “Men and women participate equally in the lives of their children. Although the mother, father and grandparents take active parts in the raising of their children, older siblings take especially good care of them.” (9)

4.21 Adult sex ratio: number of adult males divided by number of (reproductive) females: Given that men can have multiple wives suggests that more females than males.

4.22 Evidence for couvades – No evidence for couvades

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

4.24 Kin avoidance and respect? Kids interact with parents; both play equal role.

4.24 Joking relationships? Yes, parent and child relationships are more lax in Fon culture.

4.25 Patterns of descent (e.g., bilateral, matrilineal) for certain rights, names or associations: Patrilineal society, names passed on from fathers to son. “The Fon kinship system is based on patrilineal relations, with land inherited through the father’s line.” (16)

4.26 Incest avoidance rules – both traditional Fon culture and those practicing Christianity do not condone incest.

4.27 Is there a formal marriage ceremony? No evidence for details on formal marriage ceremonies of the Fon.

4.28 In what way(s) does one get a name, change their name, and obtain another name? Patrilineal society, wives take on husbands’ names. (16)

4.29 Is marriage usually (or preferred to be) within community or outside community? (m/f difference?) Generally within the community. (16)

4.30 Are marriages arranged? Who arranges (e.g., parents, close kin)? Marriages are based on bridewealth. Therefore, marriages are arranged based on wealth.

4.31 Evidence for conflict of interest over who marries who: Conflict may arise when men abuse power of polygamy. If this occurs women are allowed to divorce upon her family's request and support.

Warfare/homicide

4.14 Percent adult (male) deaths due to warfare: Warfare does not ensue in Benin

4.15 Outgroup vs ingroup cause of violent death: n/a

4.16 Reported causes of in-group and out-group killing: n/a

4.17 Number, diversity and relationship with neighboring societies (external relations): Primarily stick with own peoples in villages in towns. (11)

4.18 Cannibalism? Fon people do not practice Cannibalism

5. Socio-Political organization and interaction

5.1 Mean local residential (village) group size: "The Fon live in villages and cities. They live in rectangular – shaped houses or huts. These are made of dried mud and covered with thatched or corrugated iron roofs." (11)

5.2 Mobility pattern: (seasonality): Are an agricultural people, however land is owned and sold.

5.3 Political system: (chiefs, clans etc, wealth or status classes): "The Fon have rulers or kings that are not politically powerful but they exercise their power over their subjects at a local level." (11)

5.4 Post marital residence: "When a Fon man plans to marry, he resides closer to his father in order to learn from his experiences and to perform necessary traditional rites." (11)

5.5 Territoriality? (defined boundaries, active defense): 40% of Fon live in Benin; adhere to national government laws

5.6 Social interaction divisions ? (age and sex): No evidence supporting specific divisions.

5.7 Special friendships/joking relationships: Most befriend children of around their same age.

5.8 Village and house organization: Live with family, family structure is important to the Fon; patrilineal society, elders play active role within the family.

5.9 Specialized village structures (mens' houses): Villages traditionally have a King, however they have no significant political power. (12)

5.10 Sleep in hammocks or on ground or elsewhere? "They live in rectangular-shaped houses or huts. These are made of dried mud and covered with thatched or corrugated iron roofs." (12)

5.11 Social organization, clans, moieties, lineages, etc: Patrilineal society. Somewhat clannish traditionally following the men.

5.12 Trade: "Fon are farmers, fishermen, and market women. Division of labor is categorized by gender. Women make material to build huts, care for butchered meat, and carry out most agricultural work." (9)

5.13 Indications of social hierarchies? Wealthy traditionally have more power; each village has a king etc. (12)

6. Ritual/Ceremony/Religion (RCR)

6.0 Time allocation to RCR: Fon people regularly take part in rituals and religious ceremonies. (11)

6.1 Specialization (shamans and medicine): "Religious features among the Fon are the magic charms known as Bo. These are containers filled with magic that is believed to protect the human carriers. Every Bo has its own meaning. Some can be made of animal skulls and horns and others are made of human bones. Today the Fon also make the Bo out of modern bottles and glass." (11)

6.2 Stimulants: n/a

6.3 Passage rituals (birth, death, puberty, seasonal): Funerals are very important to Fon people. They celebrate death anniversaries of loved ones regularly. "Funerals in the culture are the most important part of a member's history. Drummers are hired and dances may be held for days in a row to mourn the death of a loved one. The Fons believe that part of the person is lost in death but the other is reincarnated and comes back in the soul of the next child born to the family." (9)

6.4 Other rituals: "Religious ceremonies often begin with the playing of drums after which believers fall into a trance after being possessed by the spirit. These spirits are invisible forces believed to mediate between humans and the gods. The spirit forces can be found everywhere such as in the air, water, forests and humans. Rituals are performed in order to bring wealth, health love and other human needs." (11) "The Fon culture is well known for their religious ceremonies. Drums are always used as a sort of special meaning in every activity that takes place. Voodoo (or Vodun) ceremonies usually begin with the playing of the drums and then an initiate will fall into a trance and become 'possessed' by a spirit." (9)

6.5 Myths (Creation): Most Fon believe in a supreme being, Mawu, whom created everything. These monotheistic beliefs are combined with Vodun. "Vodun designates all that is sacred, all power coming from the invisible world to influence the world of the living, everything that is mysterious." (12)

6.6 Cultural material (art, music, games): Fon art was commissioned by the royal court prior to French intervention. Appliqued cloths were used in the past as a sort of royal message board in the form of banners and wall hangings displayed during public gatherings. This colorful art form has gone through a metamorphosis since the 1960s, and most are now produced for the tourist market." (13)

- 6.7 Sex differences in RCR: There are female religious officials in Vodun. Christian Fon people adhere to Christian beliefs with religious leaders, (generally men). In Vodun culture all members of the community take part in events. (9)
- 6.8 Missionary effect: When they were under the French, many converted to Christianity. Also some aspects of French language crept into their natural dialect.
- 6.9 RCR revival: Traditional religion (Vodun or voodoo) is still dominant in Benin (80% follow).
- 6.10 Death and afterlife beliefs: Many people are Christian and keep with traditional Christian views of afterlife, however those who practice traditional religion believe that a part of them is reincarnated in the next child to be born in the village. (4)
- 6.11 Taboo of naming dead people? Celebrate anniversary of loved ones' deaths.
- 6.12 Is there teknonymy? No evidence of teknonymy
- 6.13 Briefly describe religion (animism, ancestor worship, deism, magic, totems etc.): There religious beliefs are complicated, they believe in one Supreme Being called Mawu, however Vodun is a religion that incorporates magic with its worship. Ancestors that have passed away are also honored, and believe to be partially reincarnated with descendants. "Vodun is a teaching of the linking of every minute soul to the great soul or Segbo. Every person has a se which he or she is responsible for cultivating the maximum spiritual adeptness for. Sometimes we refer to the great Se simply as Mawu. This term suggests a negation type description which means 'nothing more' or 'nothing greater than.'" (20)

7. Adornment

- 7.1 Body paint: No evidence of body paint
- 7.2 Piercings: Modern pictures depict Fon women of Benin having ear piercings; no other evidence of piercings (17)
- 7.3 Haircut: primarily shaved
- 7.4 Scarification: Fon do beautify themselves by scarring (16)
- 7.5 Adornment (beads, feathers, lip plates, etc.): No evidence for these.
- 7.6 Ceremonial/Ritual adornment: Drums are often used for these ceremonies (11)
- 7.7 Sex differences in adornment: Majority of Fon men and women wear European-style clothing, but some traditional aspects are still seen in Fon society. Women often wear "sarong-style" dress with colored cotton fabric. Men may be seen with wearing a tunic top, and modern shorts. Chiefs or kings are typically seen wearing what's called a parasol. This is a traditional symbol of political power for the Fon people. (16)
- 7.8 Missionary effect: European style clothing is dominant in the region, however the people do mix traditional clothing styles as mentioned above. (16)
- 7.9 Cultural revival in adornment: No significant revival however, cultural blending of traditional styles and modern European styles are seen often. (16)

8. Kinship systems

- 8.1 Sibling classification system: Older siblings often care for younger siblings. Families care for each other; family unit is essential to the Fon people. "Although the mother, father, and grandparents take active parts in the raising of their children, older siblings take especially good care of them." (9)
- 8.2 Sororate, levirate: No evidence supports that the Fon people take part in Sororate or levirate marriages. Men can have multiple wives, but women have power to divorce and remarry.
- 8.3 Other notable kinship typology, especially cross-cousin (MBD/FZD) typology (Crow/Hawaiian/Omaha etc.): Kinship based on patrilineal system. (16)

9. Other interesting cultural features (list them):

- Many Fon combine tradition Vodun with Christianity
- Before French took over The Fon were an empire called Dahomey, having an intricate role in slave trade with Europeans.

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