



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

## BACKGROUND

**Land and Climate.** Gabon straddles the equator on Africa's west coast. It covers 103,347 square miles (267,670 square kilometers), an area nearly the size of Colorado. Gabon is situated in the drainage basin of the Ogooué River. About three-fourths of the country is low-lying equatorial rain forest. The southeast is mostly savanna.

Gabon's climate is hot in the two rainy seasons (September–December, February–May) and moderate in the two dry seasons (May–September, December–February). Libreville, the capital city, has an average temperature in January of 80°F (27°C) and in July of 75°F (24°C). It receives about 99 inches (252 centimeters) of rain each year.

Tropical and coastal forests are dotted with small towns and villages. Slash-and-burn agriculture is prevalent, but Gabon's small population thus far has left the forests mostly intact. Conservation efforts include an extensive national park system that covers more than 10 percent of Gabon's area. Still, large-scale logging threatens virgin forests, which harbor countless species of plants and wildlife (many endangered and some yet unknown). Four-fifths of Africa's gorillas and chimpanzees live in Gabon. By opening the forests, logging firms may also be uncovering dangerous diseases (such as that caused by the Ebola virus found in Gabon), and the roads the firms create facilitate commercial poaching. Gabon's coast has the highest density of nesting leatherback sea turtles in Africa, and coastal waters harbor species such as humpback whales, manta rays, and dolphins. Threats to this wildlife include illegal industrial fishing and spills from offshore oil drilling.

**History.** The earliest inhabitants of Gabon were groups collectively known as Pygmies, who still live in isolated forest villages. Migrations of Bantu peoples (AD 1000) resulted in

Bantu domination of the area. The southernmost part of Gabon was ruled by the powerful Bantu Bakongo Empire, centered at the mouth of the Congo River. The rest of Gabon was comprised of small migratory villages of hunting and farming Bantus. After the first Europeans arrived in the late 15th century, the export of slaves and ivory to Europe began. These exports were replaced with timber and rubber by the early 1800s.

Coastal traders allied themselves with France, and explorers, traders, and missionaries opened the interior to incorporation into French Equatorial Africa (present-day Gabon, Cameroon, Chad, Republic of the Congo, and Central African Republic) in 1910. Gabon experienced little development during the colonial era because of its small population and dense forests. Independence was granted in 1960, but the borders were based on French Equatorial Africa's artificial internal boundaries rather than natural ethnic groupings. The first president of Gabon was Leon M'ba. He died in 1967 and was succeeded by Albert-Bernard Bongo.

Bongo instituted a relatively tolerant one-party rule. In the 1970s, Gabon joined the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), and Bongo adopted Islam, changing his first name to Omar. Protests and strikes in 1990 and 1991 forced Bongo to loosen political restrictions and legalize opposition parties. In 1991 elections, more than 40 parties ran for seats in the National Assembly. Bongo's party, the Gabonese Democratic Party (known by its French acronym, PDG), won a majority. Two years later, Bongo won the nation's first multiparty presidential election. He was reelected in 1998 with a large majority.

In July 2003, the PDG-dominated parliament amended Gabon's constitution to eliminate restrictions on the number

of terms the president is permitted to run for office. Opposition leaders condemned the amendment, as it could allow Bongo to hold power for life. Bongo won another term in Gabon's November 2005 presidential election amid accusations of vote rigging by his four opponents. Hundreds of opposition supporters marched in Libreville to denounce the result.

### THE PEOPLE

**Population.** Gabon's population of 1.5 million is growing by 2.04 percent annually. Libreville, the nation's largest city, contains about one-third of the total population. Other major cities are Port-Gentil, Franceville, and Lambaréné.

Gabon is home to more than 40 ethnic groups (most of them Bantu-speaking). The largest group is the Fang, comprising 30 percent of the population. Others include Eshira, Bapunu, Nzebi, Bavili, Balumbu, Adouma, Mbede, Bakota, Omyene, Okande, and Bateke. The 40,000 Pygmies who live in the rain forest have little or no contact with outside groups. Gabon is also home to many immigrants, especially from other French-speaking African nations. Europeans and other expatriates manage many export industries.

**Language.** French is Gabon's official language. Nearly all publishing and broadcasting occurs in French, and it is the most commonly heard language in cities. Taught in schools, it is the only language the Gabonese have in common and is basically the only written language. Local languages are primarily oral, although Christian missionaries have helped put some into written form. Most Gabonese speak both French and their ethnic group's native tongue. In the north, Fang is more common than French. People usually are not fluent in another ethnic group's language, even though many different groups live close to one another. However, some languages share similar structures and sounds and can be understood by other groups.

**Religion.** About 60 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, 20 percent is Protestant, and the remaining people practice Islam or local animist beliefs. Most Muslims are immigrants from other countries. Going to church is a popular social occasion, especially for women and girls. Most Christian clergy are from the West, but meetings are influenced by African music and are conducted in the local language by village elders. In their daily lives, people mix local beliefs with Christianity, often turning to tradition rather than to Western religion in times of emergency.

**General Attitudes.** The Gabonese are generally polite, kind, and outgoing. Although they may get loud and angry in disputes, they prefer to quickly resolve problems and rarely harbor hard feelings. The Gabonese are considered outspoken and even argumentative among some West African neighbors. Certain ethnic groups do not often say "please" and "thank you" because there is no tradition for these words in their languages. Regardless of whether a person uses the words, he or she acknowledges kindness and consideration from others and usually will repay favors.

Most Gabonese tend to accept life as it is. They see themselves first as members of a family (including the extended family, and the village in rural areas), then as part of an ethnic group, and finally as Gabonese and Africans. People who live in the rural interior do not enjoy many benefits from Gabon's oil wealth and are often frustrated with the lack of jobs, medicines, and educational opportunities. City residents have shared that frustration when oil prices have been low. Corruption and other problems have strained the nation's ability to achieve its democratic and economic goals.

**Personal Appearance.** The Gabonese wear both Western and African clothing. People like to be neatly groomed and dressed as well as possible. Modesty and cleanliness are important. The Gabonese borrow their African fashions from neighboring countries; skilled tailors are found in every town. Women like elaborate, braided hairstyles—some sticking straight out, others in intricate loops, and others tied in bunches—and they change them often. Women might wear loose-fitting dresses made of colorful, embroidered fabric or colorful *pagne* (wrap-around skirts) with blouses. Urban men might wear Western suits or, more often, just shirts and pants. A Muslim also might wear a *boubou*, a loose-fitting, long-sleeved, embroidered cotton shirt extending to midcalf that is worn over loose-fitting pants. Fabrics are colorful and designs are often bold. The youth wear shorts or other casual attire.

### CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

**Greetings.** The Gabonese shake hands and smile each time they meet, even if several times a day. If the hand is dirty, one extends a closed fist (palm down) so the greeter can "shake" the wrist or forearm. Urban friends might hug and brush alternating cheeks while "kissing the air." Men touch temples instead of brushing cheeks. In small groups, one greets each individual. In larger gatherings, one can raise both hands to the group and say *Bonjour tout le monde* (Hello, everyone). People of the same sex, especially men, often hold hands while talking or walking. It is improper, especially in rural areas, for members of the opposite sex to do this. Rural women might clasp each other's forearms when greeting. Shaking another person's hand with both hands is a sign of respect.

Urban greetings include the French *Bonjour* (Good day) and *Bonsoir* (Good evening). The Fang *Mbolo* (Hello) is common throughout Gabon. Greetings include asking about one's family and health and if one slept well the previous night. Older people may be addressed as *mama* or *papa*. People of about the same age may address each other by first name or as *mon frère* (my brother) or *ma soeur* (my sister). At work, *Monsieur* (Mr.), *Madame* ("Ms." or "Mrs."), or a title is used with the last name.

**Gestures.** A closed fist with the thumb extended up means "good." Hitting a raised, closed left fist with the right palm open means *beaucoup* (many, much). Hooking one's right thumbnail behind a front tooth and snapping it to make a loud clicking sound indicates a statement is true. To point, one quickly extends puckered lips. The Gabonese show enthusiasm by shaking the wrist rapidly to make the fingers slap together. A person expresses frustration or says "nothing" by clapping the hands together once and then opening the arms wide to the side. One indicates "come here" by holding the hand vertical, palm facing out or down, and waving the fingers in unison so they touch the palm several times. To hail a taxi, one makes a hissing sound and holds one arm out and down with the first two fingers pointing toward the ground. Muslims object to contact with one's left hand. It is impolite to touch someone's head.

**Visiting.** Visiting is common after work or on weekends in urban areas and anytime one is home in villages. Most rural socializing takes place Sunday after morning church services. Hospitality is important, and hosts frequently offer food to guests, especially if a meal is in progress. Hosts always offer a drink and quickly refill an empty glass. A guest who is not hungry should at least taste offered food. Guests usually are not expected to bring gifts, but friends might bring food or

drink. In urban areas, a new acquaintance might make a vague appointment (“I’ll drop by next week”) before visiting, but most visits are unplanned. Rural Gabonese might invite passing friends in for a drink; it is impolite to refuse, even if one has something else to do. Rural women socialize in the *cuisine* (kitchen), where much of daily life usually takes place. Kitchens generally are separate from the living quarters (*salon*), as open cooking fires are often used. The *salon* consists of a living room and bedrooms. Rural men often socialize and work together in open-air structures called *corps de gars*.

Invited guests are not expected to arrive on time. Guests customarily return the favor of an invitation at a later date. It is polite to knock before entering a home. If the door is open, the visitor imitates the knocking sound by saying *Kokoko*. One does not enter without announcing one’s presence.

**Eating.** An urban breakfast, eaten around 7 a.m., may include bread, croissants, butter, marmalade, eggs, yogurt, and coffee. In villages, breakfast may consist of leftovers from the day before, but one might also have bread and coffee or hot chocolate. *Beignets* (deep-fried doughnutlike food eaten plain or with sugar) are widely available from vendors. Lunch is the main meal of the day and is typically eaten between noon and 3 p.m. Urbanites might also eat a large dinner, while villagers typically have a light evening meal. Most urban Gabonese use utensils but eat certain foods with the hand. Rural Gabonese often eat with the right hand or a spoon from a common bowl. Men and older boys usually eat in the *salon*. Women and young children eat in the *cuisine* or outside. The father often has his own bowl. Small families might eat together in the *cuisine*. In this case, adults share one bowl and children share another. Guests are given a separate bowl.

## LIFESTYLE

**Family.** The Gabonese feel great loyalty toward family members. Family obligations require people to extend hospitality (food, lodging, and expenses) to any member of their extended family who asks for it, even for a prolonged period of time. Traditionally, an extended family lives in a large compound of several buildings, usually sharing cooking, child care, and other responsibilities. A man, his wife (or wives), their children, and often cousins or other relatives live in the compound. A man with more than one wife provides each with a separate home and kitchen whenever possible. Since this is expensive, the trend is to have only one wife. Still, a man may have children by more than one woman, and married men often have mistresses. A child’s aunts and uncles frequently have equal status to parents.

A village functions as an extension of the family. Villagers who move to urban areas have a spirit of unity with fellow villagers they meet there. They make regular visits back home; students might return on weekends or holidays to work and visit with family and friends.

**Housing.** Traditional housing is made from natural materials such as fired earthen bricks, wattle and daub, and bamboo. Roofs consist of raffia palm fronds. However, this type of housing is now limited largely to remote areas. Most village houses are made of timber boards with corrugated tin roofs. Timber houses are also found in cities, but urban homes typically have cinder-block walls with corrugated tin roofs. Most homes have modern appliances such as a television and a radio, but few have a refrigerator. As households are generally very large, it is rare for individuals to have a private room, and several children often share a bed.

**Dating and Marriage.** Western-style dating occurs mostly among the urban educated. Rural courtship involves the boy visiting the girl at her parents’ home. An engaged couple may date outside the home. The family often has great influence in the choice of a marriage partner. Girls are sometimes promised to a future husband at a very young age, although the wedding does not take place (if at all) until after puberty. A groom often must give gifts (*dote*) to the bride’s family when they get engaged and when they marry. Young men find it difficult to afford *dote*, so many do not formally wed. The Gabonese generally marry within their ethnic groups but outside of their villages to avoid marrying relatives. Women are often encouraged to have a child or two before marriage to prove fertility. These children frequently are raised by the woman’s mother and are not taken into marriage. If a marriage fails, the *dote* must be repaid and children over age five born in wedlock remain with the father.

**Life Cycle.** A newborn baby is usually named after a family member or ancestor. After the birth, the father washes his chin. The water he uses must be the first liquid the baby drinks, as it is believed it will prevent digestion problems. Presents for the mother and child are given only after the birth, because pregnancy is considered a very dangerous time for both, and it is only after the baby is born safely that celebrations may begin.

Initiation rites for adolescent girls are no longer widely practiced, but teenage boys still undergo ritual circumcision. Wearing brightly colored wraparound skirts, a group of boys is led to the ceremonial grounds, where the circumcision takes place. Afterward, the boys are presented with money and gifts.

Following a death, family and friends visit the family home to wail over the deceased’s body all night long. The body is buried the next day, when people tell stories about their remembrances of the loved one. Relatives stay with the deceased’s family for the next week or two. The *retrait de deuil* is a ceremony marking the end of the mourning period. It takes place after a few months, or even longer, depending on finances. It is a large, happy celebration. Women who have been restricted to wearing wraps of old cloth during the mourning period will dress up and braid their hair in a special way, and everyone eats, drinks, sings, and dances until the next morning.

**Diet.** For a typical meal, a staple such as *bâton de manioc* (a dough-like paste made from cassava), rice, or plantains (boiled and mashed) is served with meat or fish and a palm oil or tomato sauce. Rural Gabonese dry, salt, or smoke portions of meat and fish to preserve them. Hot peppers (*piment*) are frequently used as a spice. Water is the most common drink, but palm wine, beer, and bottled soda are also popular. The Gabonese enjoy many tropical fruits, including papaya, bananas, pineapples, mangoes, avocados, and *atangas* (a violet, bitter fruit about the size of a golf ball). *Atangas* are often boiled until soft enough to eat. Some non-Gabonese call this fruit “bush butter” and use it as a spread. *Odika*, a substance made from the pits of wild mangoes, is used to make a gravy-like sauce referred to as *chocalat* (chocolate) because of its dark color. In remote areas, people hunt wild animals (gazelles, pangolins, snakes, crocodiles, boars, monkeys, etc.). Insects such as termites or palm grubs are not an uncommon part of the diet in some parts of rural Gabon.

**Recreation.** Visiting is the most common leisure activity in Gabon. Soccer is the favorite sport, followed by basketball. Volleyball and cycling are also popular. Television is available

in many parts of the country. Dancing to drums and local music is usually a part of weddings, religious ceremonies, and other occasions. A popular, traditional strategy game called *songo* (in Fang) is played with pebbles or seeds on a wooden board. Young people enjoy tag, jump rope, and tug-of-war. Children are very creative in making their own toys (cars, dolls, airplanes, games) from scraps and forest materials.

**The Arts.** Folklore and other forms of oral literature maintain a strong influence in Gabonese life. Stories are often sung, accompanied by instruments such as the *cythar*, a type of harp. These performances, as well as various dances, are prominent features of Gabonese celebrations. Though regarded more as an art form today, wooden masks traditionally played a large role in religious rituals and rites of passage. These masks vary in style according to region and tribal affiliation. Gabonese sculpture uses traditional motifs in modern formats. Popular folk arts include domestic items such as mats and baskets made from palm, bamboo, and other vegetation.

**Holidays.** Official public holidays include such Christian holy days as *Pâques* (Easter), *Pentecôte* (Pentecost), *Toussaint* (All Saints' Day, 1 November), and *Noël* (Christmas). The Islamic holy days of *Fin du Ramadan* (a feast at the end of *Ramadan*, a month of fasting) and *Fête de Mouton* (a feast to honor Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son) are observed according to their dates on the lunar calendar. The Gabonese celebrate *Jour de l'An* (New Year's Day) and *Fête du Travail* (May Day, 1 May). *Fête National* commemorates independence on 17 August.

## SOCIETY

**Government.** Gabon's president (currently Omar Bongo) is head of state, and a prime minister (currently Jean Eyeghe Ndong) is head of government. The president has the most authority and appoints the prime minister. Elections for the presidency are held every seven years; there are no term limits. The legislature consists of a 91-seat Senate and a 120-seat National Assembly (*Assemblée Nationale*). Members of the Senate serve six-year terms; members of the National Assembly serve five-year terms. All citizens age 21 and older must vote. The PDG is the dominant political party.

**Economy.** Historically, Gabon's major exports were *okoumé* (a hardwood) and soft woods used to make plywood. Timber exports continue, but they have been exceeded by oil exports since the 1970s. Oil constitutes one-third of Gabon's gross domestic product (GDP) and 80 percent of the country's exports. Manganese and uranium are also exported. Export industries are owned mostly by foreign companies. Coffee, cocoa, sugarcane, and palm oil are the largest commercial crops. Most food and other commodities are imported, making Libreville one of the most expensive cities in the world. Because of the value of Gabon's exports, its real GDP per capita is relatively high for Africa. However, most wealth is in the hands of a small minority, and 65 percent of Gabonese rely on subsistence agriculture. Corruption and oil price fluctuations have hindered development, and unemployment is high. Gabon is trying to diversify its economy to reduce dependence on oil. The currency is the *CFA franc* (XAF).

**Transportation and Communications.** Only wealthy people and government officials have access to private cars. Animals are not often used for transportation, and bicycles and motor-

## POPULATION & AREA

Population	1,454,867 (rank=150)
Area, sq. mi.	103,347 (rank=75)
Area, sq. km.	267,670

## DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	119 of 177 countries
Adjusted for women	104 of 156 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$6,954
Adult literacy rate	89% (male); 80% (female)
Infant mortality rate	60 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	56 (male); 57 (female)

cycles are rare, so people mostly walk. In cities, taxis and buses are available. For long-distance travel, people use an *occasion*, or "bush-taxi," which is often crowded. *Occasion* passengers pay a commonly understood fare and take their luggage, food, and animals with them. With only a few exceptions near commercial capitals, roads between major cities are not paved and are difficult to travel during the rainy seasons. Domestic airlines operate, but flights are too expensive for all but the wealthiest Gabonese. The Trans-Gabonais railway provides daily service between Libreville and Franceville. Goods are transported by rail from Libreville to Franceville or by truck or air to other interior destinations, making imports more expensive in the interior than in the capital.

Gabon's two main television stations are state-run. One government newspaper and several private newspapers are in circulation. Mail moves slowly because it is all sorted at the capital, regardless of its origin or destination. In most cities, only major business and government offices have landline telephones, but many people have a cellular phone. Cellular phone coverage is almost nationwide.

**Education.** Gabon follows the French system of education, in which students attend school for as many as 13 years and end with a *bac* (baccalaureate) exam. Free education is provided, and nearly all children are enrolled in and finish primary school, which lasts six years. However, only one-fifth continue on for seven years of secondary school. Girls are less likely to finish school than boys because of family obligations. Rural schools often have a shortage of teachers and lack books and other critical supplies. Students who pass the *bac* may attend one of Gabon's two universities at no cost. University graduates often work for the government.

**Health.** In Gabon's healthcare system, patients must pay for doctors' services. Medicine is expensive and is often unavailable in rural areas. Village clinics are not well equipped, so villagers must often travel to the nearest town or city for medical care. They might visit a local healer (*nganga*) as well as, or instead of, a town doctor. Serious medical problems can be treated only in Libreville. Hospital patients are responsible for their own bedding and food. HIV/AIDS is a growing problem, and malaria is widespread. Outbreaks of the deadly Ebola virus periodically strike rural areas where people come into contact with infected animals.

## AT A GLANCE

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