



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

Mali, the seventh largest country in Africa, is about twice the size of Texas. It covers 478,841 square miles (1,240,192 square kilometers). Mali's north is in the southern Sahara Desert. Farther south is the semiarid Sahel with limited vegetation, mostly in the form of bushes and a few trees. Together, desert or semidesert regions cover 70 percent of the country. Only in the deep south can one find abundant vegetation and mango groves. The fertile Niger River area is home to most of Mali's economic activity. 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.

Mali has three seasons. Temperatures average 110°F (43°C) during the rainy season (June–September); humidity is lower but temperatures are higher in the north. Rain is minimal in the north. The “cold” season (October–February) is dry; temperatures average 85°F (30°C). In the hot season (March–May) daily highs reach well above 125°F (50°C).

History

From the seventh to the nineteenth centuries, parts of Mali were ruled by the kings of the Ghana, Malinke, Songhai, Bambara, and Toucouleur Empires. The Songhai Empire in the 15th and 16th centuries covered twice the territory of modern Mali. In the 14th century, Mali was the richest and largest West African empire. Tombouctou (Timbuktu) was a center of Islamic learning. Malians proudly remember this

history through tale and song.

Colonialism came at the turn of the 20th century, and Mali was a French colony (Western Sudan) until 1960, when it gained independence under a socialist government led by Modibo Keita. In 1968, a military coup brought Moussa Traoré to power as president. In 1979, Traoré added civilians to his cabinet and formed a 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, Lt. 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 elections in 1992.

Voters approved a new constitution, elected a National Assembly, and elected Alpha Oumar Konaré as president. Student riots in 1993 threatened political stability, but Konaré negotiated with student leaders to end the crisis. Konaré also began negotiating with Tuareg rebels, who had long struggled to gain independence for their light-skinned ethnic group. The Tuaregs are nomads who follow their herds through Mali, Niger, and Mauritania, and who have fought Mali's governments for decades, despite several peace deals.

In 1997, flawed legislative elections were annulled but rescheduled. Konaré's party, the Alliance for Democracy, won a majority in parliament. Konaré was reelected in 1997 to a second and final term. As Konaré stepped down in 2002, Touré won the presidency in a hotly contested election. Twenty-four candidates competed in the first round of voting, and some 47 counts of fraud and voting irregularities had to

be resolved by a constitutional court before a winner could be announced. Touré, who ran as an independent candidate with the support of minor parties, won 64 percent of the vote in the election's second-round runoff, defeating the candidate from the Alliance for Democracy. Touré was reelected in April 2007.

THE PEOPLE

Population

Mali's population of 13.8 million is growing annually by 2.6 percent. Nearly 90 percent of Malians reside in the fertile southern third of the country, while 10 percent (mostly nomadic people) live in the arid north. About 64 percent of all Malians live in rural areas. Of the 20 major ethnic groups, several comprise less than 1 percent of the population. Mande peoples (Bambara, Malinke, and Soninke) make up half of the population. Of these, the Bambara constitute the largest group and generally populate the central and southern regions. The second largest group is the Malinke of the southwest and west. The Soninke live in the northwest near Mauritania. The Fulani (who are also known as the Peul) are seminomadic herders who traditionally inhabit the northern desert and comprise some 17 percent of the population. Many Fulani migrated south and settled in the Mopti region due to deteriorating environmental conditions in the north. The Songhai live in the northeast along the Niger River, as do the Bozo, who earn their living from fishing in the Niger Delta. The Dogons live on and around the Bandiagara escarpment (also called the Dogon Cliffs). The Menianka and Senufo inhabit the southwest, along the border with Burkina Faso and Ivory Coast. The Tuaregs herd in the north.

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 and is the primary language of school instruction. However, the most widely spoken tongue is Bambara. Other languages include Fulfulde, Dogon, Senufo, and Dioula. As is common in Africa, language is mainly oral. Books are published in at least four Malian languages, but history is transmitted by narration from generation to generation, from master to scholar, and from parent to child. A special caste called the *griot* has the responsibility to recount and sing the great past.

Religion

Ninety percent of all Malians are Muslim. Most of the rest, especially in the south and along the Dogon Cliffs, adhere to traditional religions, which usually emphasize animism. About 1 percent are Christian. The Peul, Sarakole, Moor, Songhai, and Tamashek have been Muslim for a long time. They honor Islam's Five Pillars of Faith by professing the name of *Allah* and declaring Muhammad to be his prophet; praying five times daily; fasting during the holy month of *Ramadan*; giving alms to the poor and *garabouts*, boys who attend *Qur'anic* schools and must beg for daily food; and making a pilgrimage to Makkah, Saudi Arabia. Some

Muslims still practice aspects of their traditional faiths, such as using masks or totem animals and wearing *gri gri* charms (amulets used to protect a person from harm or illness). Ritual dances are performed to encourage rain for good harvests or for other events.

General Attitudes

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 and not to offend. Malians often joke with other groups about family names or castes. These "joking cousin" remarks help maintain friendly ties and calm tensions between the many groups. Malians are rarely confrontational and will settle differences through a second party. Time is oriented more toward tradition and convenience than innovation or urgency. Muslims believe the "will of *Allah*" affects all events.

Between similar ethnic groups, caste membership determines one's relative social position. However, between dissimilar groups, such as the light-skinned peoples versus the dark-skinned sub-Saharan Malians, ethnicity is a distinguishing factor and cause of long-standing tensions. Traditional roles are often more important than assumed roles. A driver born as a "noble," for instance, may be more respected than a government official from a blacksmith family. However, wealth grants social status for any individual. Malians value hard work, honesty, generosity, and intelligence in others.

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. General civic loyalties are shallow, but family needs come before individual wants.

Personal Appearance

Malians place great importance on physical appearance. Neatness and modesty are highly valued. Western clothing is common in urban areas, although women tend to wear traditional clothing more often than men. Men wear trousers, not shorts, and a shirt. Wealthy men may wear a traditional *boubou* (long and flowing embroidered robe) over pants and shirt. Rural Muslim women wear long wraparound skirts, blouses, and sandals; animist women may omit blouses and shoes. Most women keep their hair covered.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

Men and women either shake right hands or (sometimes when greeting a member of the opposite sex) 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 a 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. Sometimes Malians don't announce their family name to strangers until they're better acquainted, but other times doing so provides a quick way to reveal one's background and generate conversation. Friends generally address one another by given name.

Gestures

Because the left hand is considered unclean, it is disrespectful and unhygienic to take a Malian's left hand, offer the left for a handshake, offer food or money with it, eat with it, or 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. Personal space is limited and people of the same sex often touch when conversing. One does not look an elder in the eye during conversation.

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 on the value of the relationship. Visits between rural friends and relatives occur often and usually unannounced, as making prior arrangements is difficult without telephones. 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 may 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 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 from a small shot 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

Wealthy families eat their meals with a spoon and often other utensils, but eating food with the right hand is most common and traditional. Family members eat 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. Each person eats from the portion of the bowl that is directly in front of him or her. Adult men and women seldom eat from the same bowl.

LIFESTYLE

Family

Rural Malian families are large, but urban families are smaller. The infant mortality rate is high, and parents believe they must have many children to provide a posterity and sufficient hands for agricultural labor. Babies receive a lot of affection, but older children care for younger ones because parents are too busy working. Children assume chores by age five: girls make flour by pounding millet and corn; boys tend the livestock. Older boys work in the fields and older girls cook and care for younger siblings. Young women marry by the age of 18. The elderly enjoy great respect. The family or clan chief's authority is incontestable. Extended family members are obligated to help other family members in need, no matter how distant the relationship. The average wage earner cares for 10 people. Saving money is almost impossible.

Housing

Extended family members usually live close to one another, often within a shared compound. In urban areas, a compound may consist of several apartments surrounding a central courtyard with a well. An apartment typically has bare cement floors and walls and a corrugated tin roof. Colored mats on the floor and posters or photographs on the walls adorn sparsely furnished dwellings. Access to electricity is sporadic. Slums are growing on the edges of cities.

In rural areas, a compound is surrounded by a wall and contains mud-brick houses for each nuclear family as well as cooking huts, storage huts, granaries, and a well. The design of the houses varies by region. In the south, houses are usually square, but in the north, houses tend to be round. All rural houses are made of bricks comprised of straw, manure, and mud, which are covered in another layer of mud as plaster. Most families have thatched roofs, while the wealthy have corrugated tin roofs. Homes have a central living room and two or three bedrooms. There is usually one room for each wife (if the family is polygamous) and one for the husband, who may also sleep in the main room as a protector. These structures suffer great damage during the rainy season; each year owners must re-thatch leaky roofs and re-mud walls.

Dating and Marriage

In urban areas, dating begins at about age 15, and promiscuity

is widespread. In rural areas, rules differ according to the ethnic or social group. Individuals usually accept their families' judgment in the choice of a marital partner. Weddings involve many guests, much food, and dancing.

Marriage rules are influenced strongly by Islam, but the position of the woman is less dependent than in other Muslim countries since she can, under certain conditions, divorce her husband and rejoin her family. Polygamy is practiced (as allowed and controlled by Islamic law), but it is increasingly regarded as an economic burden. A Muslim man who wishes to take another wife usually seeks the approval of his first wife and then must provide for all wives (up to four) equally. Many urban women no longer accept the status of secondary spouse. Some rural women appreciate the extra help that multiple wives can provide.

Life Cycle

Because of a high rate of infant mortality, parents wait until they believe the child will survive before they give it a name. A naming ceremony is then held. Because most given names are of Islamic origin, the naming ceremony also serves to welcome the child into the family of Islam. After two or more years girls, and less commonly boys, are ritually circumcised. Among some animist groups, boys are circumcised between the ages of five and twelve. From then on, the boys wear pants instead of shorts, which are typically associated with childhood.

The size of a funeral indicates the standing of the deceased person. For example, the oldest man in a village would have 50 cows slaughtered and a week-long celebration; family from far away would make a pilgrimage to pay final respects. Immediately after a person's death, the body is not touched until a blessing has been offered and the family has mourned. The body is washed, wrapped in cloth, and carried through the village in a celebratory procession to honor the deceased. The procession makes frequent stops for singing and dancing. After a full day of celebration, the body is buried and the festivities continue at the family's house.

Diet

The staples of a Malian diet are millet and corn. Flour is prepared as a thick porridge (*tô*) and dipped in a leaf or vegetable sauce. Popular is *tiga diga na* (peanut butter sauce); a meat sauce (goat, sheep, beef, or chicken) might be used on occasion. In the north, milk, dates, and wheat are important foods. Urban residents eat rice when possible. Malnutrition is widespread in Mali. During the "hungry season" (July–August), when food stores are depleted and new crops not ready to harvest, people rely on fresh mangoes to supplement scant meals. Bananas and oranges are also available.

Recreation

The most popular sport in Mali is soccer. It is inexpensive, and as a spectator sport provides people with an opportunity to sit together and talk while watching the game. Rural children play with sticks, stones, and used tires. Informal peer groups, known as *groupe de grain*, often meet together to drink tea and socialize. In Bamako and other urban areas,

wealthier people spend considerable time watching television and videos.

The Arts

Music and dance are a fundamental part of daily life. Most players of traditional music belong to a caste called *jélé*. Many of Mali's musical forms come from the Malinke 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. Carefully made designs and colors flavor the art of weaving, much of which is done by a weaver caste. Mud painted on specially primed fabric creates the *bogolan* (mud cloth). 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, Army Day (20 Jan.), Labor Day (1 May), and Independence Day (22 Sept.). The most important religious holidays are the feast at the end of *Ramadan* (when Muslims go without food and drink during the day but eat in the evenings) and *Tabaski* (a feast honoring Abraham for his willingness to sacrifice his son). The dates for these feasts change each year because Islam uses the lunar calendar. In cities, Christmas and Easter Monday are observed as days off from work. In animist areas, festivals associated with the seasons are celebrated with mask dancing.

SOCIETY

Government

Mali is a multiparty democracy. The president (currently Amadou Toumani Touré) is head of state; a prime minister (currently Modibo Sidibé) is head of government. The president is elected to a maximum of two five-year terms and appoints the prime minister. Malians also elect the 147 members of the National Assembly to five-year terms. A Supreme Court is the final court of authority. The voting age is 18. Several political parties are active. Local decisions are made by village elders, who often consult under a tree until a consensus is reached. District chiefs are also elected.

Economy

Mali is one of the world's poorest countries, and most of its people have little ability to change their circumstances. Eighty percent of the labor force is employed in agriculture; however, most of the work is for subsistence. Crops depend on sufficient rain, and food surpluses are rare. Harvests are often affected by drought, locusts, and certain kinds of weeds.

Wage earners usually are government employees, such as teachers.

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, cattle, gold, and peanuts. Small enterprises are growing, but the purchasing power of the domestic market is limited. Many small local efforts have succeeded in extending loans to women entrepreneurs and in raising revenue to build and staff primary schools. Mali lacks the necessary infrastructure (hotels, transport, services, etc.) needed to develop a viable tourist market. The country benefits from international aid and development projects. Mali uses the currency common to francophone African countries, the *CFA franc* (XOF).

Transportation and Communications

Travel by road is difficult, since the only paved road connects the regional capitals and most other 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 can use the river year-round. Commonly used is the *pinasse*, a covered motorized canoe. Buses link major cities, but outlying areas are usually only accessible by pickup trucks or vans that carry passengers and their cargo. People otherwise walk, ride bikes, or have mopeds. Television broadcasts can be received in most regions, but access to a television and power source is limited in rural areas. Programs are mostly in French. Radio broadcasts, a main source of news, are in local languages. Numerous daily newspapers prosper in a free press. Telephone connections are generally good but not extensive. Cell phones are now common. 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

A rising literacy rate is linked to higher rural enrollment (43 percent) in locally built primary schools. However, overall access to education is limited by school fees and the use of French as the language of instruction. Few adults read or write in French or Bambara. Professional training is relatively rare. Public schools, as well as Catholic, U.S., and French schools, serve urban areas. Rural Catholic or Protestant missions usually include a school. Many parents send their children (mostly boys) to *Qur'anic* schools and leave them in the care of the teacher. The University of Bamako offers bachelor degrees in a number of disciplines.

Health

Medical facilities and services are inadequate or nonexistent in much of the country. On average, there is only one doctor for every 12,500 people. Clinics often are without staff or supplies. Hospitals in regional capitals have inadequate equipment. Widespread epidemics of malaria cause several thousand deaths each year. HIV/AIDS, influenza, 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 one-third of all 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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POPULATION & AREA

Population	13,796,354 (rank=67)
Area, sq. mi.	478,841 (rank=25)
Area, sq. km.	1,240,192

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	160 of 182 countries
Gender inequality rank	135 of 155 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$1,200
Adult literacy rate	54% (male); 40% (female)
Infant mortality rate	114 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	51 (male); 54 (female)

*UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2010 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).