



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

Senegal lies in the westernmost part of Africa. Covering 75,955 square miles (196,722 square kilometers), it is about the size of South Dakota. Most of the country north of The Gambia (a separate country that cuts through Senegal's southwest) is flat, with rolling plains and few trees. Part of northern Senegal lies in Africa's semiarid Sahel region and is subject to desertification. The southeast has plateaus with elevations over 1,600 feet (480 meters). The southwest features forests and seasonally flooded lowlands. Much of Senegal is subject to drought, overgrazing, and deforestation. Dakar, the capital, is a major port for West Africa.

Senegal has a tropical climate with warm temperatures year-round. During the hot, humid rainy season (about July to September, depending on the region) temperatures regularly reach 95°F (35°C). The rainy season brings nearly all of the annual precipitation. This is 22 inches (550 millimeters) in Dakar, about half that amount in the north, and more than 60 inches (1,500 millimeters) in the Casamance region, the section of Senegal below The Gambia. Temperatures moderate during the dry season (December–April), with highs around 80°F (27°C). Dakar and other coastal areas are generally cooler than the rest of the country.

History

Black Africans historically have lived in the area now called Senegal. Great empires and independent kingdoms existed in the area from AD 300 to the 19th century. Islamic merchants

from North Africa introduced Islam to the animistic peoples of the area in the 10th century. Portuguese sailors first traded with the people in the mid-1400s but were replaced by the French, English, and Dutch in the 1500s. The slave trade was established, and peanuts were introduced as a new crop to supply European demand. Several million West Africans were shipped to the Americas as slaves between the 16th and 19th centuries. Many were sold at an auction house that still stands on Goree Island (near Dakar).

By the 1800s, France began to dominate the area, conquering various kingdoms and establishing Senegal as one of several colonies in an administrative federation called French West Africa. Slavery was abolished in 1848, but French economic, educational, political, and judicial systems remained intact at the administrative level. After World War II, many residents began to demand independence. On 4 April 1960, the colony became a sovereign nation. France and Senegal still maintain close political, economic, and social ties.

Leopold Senghor became Senegal's president upon independence and held the position for more than 20 years. Before he stepped down in 1981, Senegal's constitution was amended to eliminate restrictions on political parties. Abdou Diouf was elected president and his party, the Senegalese Socialist Party (PS), came to dominate parliament. Diouf was reelected in 1988 and 1993. When his party again dominated 1998 parliamentary elections, opposition groups refused to accept the results, claiming widespread fraud. Diouf reversed a vow to retire in 2000 by entering the race for president in February of that year. After the second round of voting, his rival and five-time presidential candidate, Abdoulaye Wade

of the Senegalese Democratic Party (PDS), was elected president. Diouf accepted the results and stepped down peacefully. Wade was inaugurated in April 2000. He was reelected in February 2007.

Senegal's history has been largely peaceful, though the nation has suffered the effects of a long-running separatist movement in the Casamance region. In 1982, a rebel group based primarily in the Diola-majority areas, launched a campaign for independence, claiming discrimination by the more numerous Wolof people of northern Senegal. More than two decades of violence cost an estimated 3,500 lives. In December 2004, the government reached a peace agreement with the main rebel group, the Movement for the Democratic Forces of Casamance (known by its French acronym, MFDC). However, MFDC factions have opposed the treaty and continue to fight for the region's independence.

THE PEOPLE

Population

Senegal's population of 12.3 million is growing by 2.6 percent annually. About 42 percent of the population lives in urban areas. A growing number of young people from rural areas move to cities, searching for better economic opportunities. During the rainy season, many people migrate to the rural areas to work harvesting crops. Roughly 42 percent is younger than age 15. The nation's ethnic groups include the Wolof (43 percent of the population), Pular (24 percent), Serer (15 percent), Diola (4 percent), Mandinka (3 percent), Soninke (1 percent), and a number of smaller groups. Europeans and Lebanese comprise about 1 percent of the population. Lebanese form an influential merchant class.

Language

The nation's official language is French. This is the language of school instruction and is used in business and government settings. However, French is becoming less popular because many see it as the language of Senegal's colonizers. In everyday conversation, people use the language of their ethnic group, such as Wolof, Fula (or Pulaar), Serer, Diola, and Mandinka. The most widely spoken language is Wolof, the native language of the dominant ethnic group. In fact, non-Wolofs north of The Gambia are bilingual in Wolof and their own ethnic language. Senegalese languages are primarily oral. Attempts to create writing systems for these languages have met with some success. Many younger children now can write in their native language using a modified Latin alphabet. Muslims often use the Arabic alphabet to write in Wolof or one of the other local languages. A growing number of Senegalese speak English, although it is not widely understood.

Religion

About 94 percent of the population is Muslim, 5 percent is Christian (mostly Catholic), and 1 percent is animist or follows indigenous beliefs. The constitution guarantees freedom of religion and separation of church and state. Both Muslim and Catholic holy days are national holidays, but

Islam dominates social and political activities. The *marabouts* (Muslim religious leaders) influence voting patterns and economic practices and have a strong impact on the country's development. The *marabouts* became powerful during the drive for independence. They were the movement's most vocal and supportive leaders and drew many animists to Islam because of their popularity.

Many Senegalese, especially in the south, combine their formal religion (Islam or Christianity) with indigenous animist practices and ceremonies. Villagers believe in spirits and genies and often wear a *gri gri* (charm) around their arms, stomach, or neck to protect them from illness and evil spirits. For instance, a woman who is having headaches may pin a *gri gri* in her hair to protect herself. *Mourides* belong to a special brotherhood and practice a unique form of Islam developed in Senegal.

General Attitudes

Senegal has many diverse ethnic groups within its borders, each with its own history, language, and culture. Interactions between these groups and with non-African cultures have produced a multicultural people proud of their origins. Typically, a person's allegiances extend toward the family first, and then, in descending order, to an ethnic group, a religion, the home village, Senegal, the region of French West Africa, and finally, Africa. Personal relations, including doing favors and returning them, are extremely important in daily life. According to the Senegalese concept of hospitality, or *teranga*, one freely shares with family and friends; this is considered integral to good relations.

Concepts of time and distance are defined by a person's background. For example, a Senegalese farmer, whose way of life may not include motor vehicles, will consider a five-hour walk to another village a short trip. But that would be a long trip for an urban professional, who might drive rather than walk a short distance. Most other aspects of life are widely different between urban and rural classes. For instance, while wealthy and educated women may hold public office and be employed in important business positions in urban areas, rural women rarely have such opportunities. Throughout the country, women are responsible for the daily functions of the household. The Senegalese, urban and rural, are interested in domestic and world politics and appreciate exchanging ideas with foreign visitors.

Personal Appearance

Senegalese place great emphasis on their appearance and personal hygiene. Most bathe more than once a day, and perfumes or colognes are popular. Dressing well is important. Clothing is usually ironed. Men do not go out in public without a shirt, and few women, with the exception of young, urban women, wear pants or shorts. Revealing clothing is not appropriate in public. People wear beachwear only on the beach; shorts are for athletics.

Most adults wear traditional clothing. Young urban dwellers wear Western fashions or mix Western and traditional styles. Young people in rural areas are also adopting Western styles, but to a lesser extent. As they grow older, most people choose to wear more traditional clothing.

Traditional clothing for men includes loose-fitting cotton robes (*boubous*) worn over bouffant pants and a loose shirt. The amount or quality of embroidery can indicate one's level of wealth. Women wear a long robe over a long wraparound skirt (*pagne*); some skirts have multiple layers. A matching head wrap completes the outfit. Some ethnic groups have facial tattoos or ritual facial scarring. Most Muslim women do not wear veils, wearing a head covering called a *mussor* instead. Muslim women who have made a pilgrimage to Makkah, Saudi Arabia, wear a white scarf, while men wear a white headdress; these people are treated with great respect.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

Senegalese greetings vary depending on the circumstances and how well people know each other. Shaking hands and kissing alternate cheeks three times (a French tradition) is common in urban areas. Rural Senegalese only shake hands, and social rules determine who may shake with whom. A minority of Muslim men do not shake hands with women. In traditional families, children and women respectfully curtsy to their elders when greeting. When joining or leaving a small group, one must greet each individual separately. Whatever greeting was used between two people is also used when parting. Upon parting, most Senegalese ask each other to extend best wishes to their families and mutual friends.

Gestures

Senegalese receive and give objects with their right hand or with both hands. Use of the left hand alone is considered unclean and disrespectful. Senegalese tell street vendors they are not interested in their goods by motioning with a pushing back gesture and avoiding eye contact. They hail taxis by raising one arm. To get another person's attention, one might snap the fingers if close or hiss ("tsss") if farther away. Men and women keep their distance in public and are expected to be dignified and reserved around members of the opposite sex. More relaxed behavior is acceptable with members of the same gender, age, or status. Public displays of affection are impolite, although some urban couples hold hands. People of the same sex may hold hands in public as a sign of friendship. Senegalese avoid eye contact with a person who is of the opposite sex or considered a superior (in age or status).

Visiting

Senegalese enjoy visiting one another often. Dropping in uninvited is acceptable and appreciated. Still, uninvited guests try to visit before mealtimes, either in the late morning or early evening. In urban areas, it is more common to call before stopping by. Work, health, family matters, and mutual friends are briefly discussed before a visitor addresses the purpose of the visit. People remove their shoes when visiting a Muslim religious leader (or entering a mosque); women cover their heads.

Senegalese are hospitable and can make a guest feel comfortable without expecting anything in return. However, friends will often bring gifts such as fruit or some cookies for

the children. Hosts will offer a drink (usually nonalcoholic). Guests are often treated to three rounds of tea, with more sugar added in each round. To decline a drink, it is polite to say one has just finished drinking. It is impolite to refuse other refreshments. Hosts and visitors often share a kola nut (which contains a mild caffeine stimulant). The nuts also play an important role in conflict resolution and social celebrations, such as weddings. Although smoking is widespread among males, visitors to traditional Muslim homes avoid cigarette smoking until they leave. It is considered bad manners for women to smoke. It is considered bad luck to ask specific questions about children, such as when a baby is due, how many children one has, or what their ages are.

Eating

Generally, breakfast is between 6 and 9 a.m., lunch is between 1 and 3 p.m., and dinner is after 8 p.m. In traditional homes, the sexes and different age groups eat separately. Muslims eat only *halal* meat, which means it is slaughtered according to Islamic tradition, including saying a prayer first. The main dish usually is served in large bowls placed on mats on the floor or ground, or on coffee tables. Today many people use plates and utensils when eating. In more traditional circles, several people eat from the same bowl using the fingers or a spoon, depending on personal habit, the occasion, and the dish. It is important for diners to have clean hands, eat only from the portion of the communal dish directly in front of them, and avoid eye contact with persons still eating. One uses only the right hand to eat. The left can assist the right when one eats difficult foods, such as fruit or meat with bones, but the left hand should never be put in the communal bowl.

LIFESTYLE

Family

In general, the family is a source of strength and pride for Senegalese. Closeness and togetherness are greatly valued. In most rural areas and among traditional urban families, extended families live together in compounds (with separate dwellings for each nuclear family) or in a large house divided among nuclear families. The urban trend is for nuclear families to live in single households, though often near relatives. Rural family strength and unity are weakened as young men migrate to cities in search of work. Baptisms, circumcisions, marriages, funerals, and other important ceremonies are cause for elaborate celebrations.

Although there is a growing middle class and a small wealthy elite, most families live at subsistence levels as agricultural workers. Daily life revolves around the home, as men generally work in the fields near their homes and women occupy themselves taking care of the household. Sons and unmarried daughters are not expected to leave the family home. When a woman marries, she generally goes to live with her husband's family. Grown children are supported by the rest of the family until they are able to find jobs. Traditionally, very few people moved from their family's

compound. Today, people may leave to seek economic opportunities elsewhere, mainly in the larger cities. People may also move out as part of the growing trend towards living in nuclear families. Especially in cities, the younger generation's focus is narrowing from the extended family to the nuclear family. Many see this as less a conscious choice and more a response to economic challenges. Despite these changes to the traditional family living arrangements, Senegalese families strive to remain close. Families visit one another often, sometimes going to stay with one another for extended periods of time, and stay in touch through phone calls as much as possible.

Extended families usually make group decisions jointly. Individual decisions are left to the individual, although family input is always given and usually heeded. A desire for privacy or solitude is generally not understood within the family. Conflicts are resolved within the family whenever possible, without involving non family members.

Resources are shared among family members. If someone is in need, the other members contribute what they can to help. This aid is freely given and generally expected, with the understanding that aid will be reciprocated when needed. The elderly receive great respect and are cared for by their families. There are no retirement homes.

Within each family, one sibling is expected to serve as a protector, peace maker, and advisor to the other siblings, and when the parents pass away, this person is to take over the leadership role in the nuclear family. The role develops slowly and informally over time, and other siblings are expected to respect this leadership.

Women are active in all aspects of Senegalese society. However, more opportunities are available to urban, educated women than to rural women. While a woman may run a business or attend university, she is still responsible for the care of the household, children, and sometimes her husband's parents. Children's behavior, even after children are grown, is seen as a reflection on the mother more so than the father.

Housing

Rural dwellings are usually made from natural materials available in the surrounding area. Most homes are mud-brick structures with thatched roofs. Mud is also used as mortar. In the north, huts are square and roof beams are split palm trunks. In the south, huts are round and the roof is a bamboo frame covered by long woven-grass mats. The mats tightly overlap to keep out rain. Many homes have steeply sloping roofs that are designed to deflect rain. Roofs are often made of straw or zinc, if the owner can afford it. Wealthier families prefer cement homes. In rural areas, homes are generally bigger and more spread out. Most rural homes have a small farm behind them, where people grow gardens and keep livestock. An extended family lives in a compound of several one-room huts. When possible, each husband has his own hut, while each wife shares another larger hut with her children. The bathroom and kitchen are separate structures. There is also usually a small building where food is stored after the harvest.

Most urban houses are rectangular and have concrete-block walls and corrugated tin roofs. These

structures have several rooms to house the entire nuclear family. People paint their homes in a variety of colors, or they may choose to tile the outside walls if they can afford it. Floors are usually tile or linoleum.

Apartments are an important part of the urban landscape. Apartment buildings may be multiple stories and contain many small apartments, as landlords attempt to fit as many paying tenants into a space as possible. Shantytowns are common in urban areas. Conditions in the slums are often crowded and unsanitary. Dwellings are constructed from whatever materials can be salvaged, such as corrugated tin and cardboard.

While most urban homes and apartments have electricity and running water, these services are unreliable and outages are common. Most rural areas and urban shantytowns lack access to electricity and running water. In rural areas, people rely on wells and rivers for their water. Most people prefer to cook over an open flame or with a propane tank instead of using an electric stove.

Decorations vary according to the home owner's income. Furniture is often minimal. Bed frames are usually made from branches and bamboo, and mattresses often consist of rice sacks stitched together and stuffed with dry grass. Furniture is usually placed against the walls, keeping the middle of the hut open. Cleanliness is generally deemed more important than decoration, and people go to great lengths to keep their homes tidy.

Dating and Marriage

Western-style dating, where relative strangers go out with one another, is uncommon in Senegal. People tend to go out in groups or in couples with a person they and their families know. In fact, a couple's families tend to be heavily involved in courtship. Traditional families arrange marriages, but a growing number of urban residents marry according to their choice. Couples are often encouraged to marry young. However, it is acceptable for college students to wait until after they finish school. Muslim engagements are generally short, while Christians may be engaged for longer periods of time. Only Christian women wear engagement rings after becoming engaged.

A woman's virtue is greatly valued. It is considered shameful for a woman to become pregnant before marriage. Unwed fathers are less stigmatized. Sexual relations before marriage are widely condemned on both social and religious grounds. Unmarried couples living together are rare in rural areas, but more common in cities.

Many Muslims practice polygamy. Islamic law permits a man to have as many as four wives, but he must have the consent of the other wife (or wives), and according to the Qur'an (Koran), he must divide his resources and time equally among each wife's household. As a result, it is common for a man to have two wives but rare to have more than this. In recent years, the attitude towards polygamy has become increasingly mixed, with some Senegalese opposing it. This, coupled with the economic strain associated with multiple wives, has led to a decline in polygamy.

A husband is often much older than his wife (especially a second wife) because he needs to accumulate enough wealth

to afford the bride-price presented to the wife's family prior to the marriage. The bride-price may be paid in cash, cattle, or land. Paying a bride-price to a woman's family is a requirement in all marriages, regardless of religion or ethnic group. After lengthy negotiations, the man pays the woman's family to compensate for the loss of their daughter, who lives with the groom's family after the wedding.

Senegalese weddings contain religious, traditional, and civil elements. Weddings are often seen as the union of two communities, represented by the couple. The religious part of the ceremony differs between Muslims, Christians, and animists. Muslim ceremonies begin at the mosque after the 5 p.m. prayers. The bride usually does not attend the ceremony at the mosque, but waits at home in her mother's room instead. She is represented at the ceremony by the male members of her family. After the ceremony, the men come to the home to congratulate the bride and pray for her successful marriage. Marriages between Muslim men and Christian women are not uncommon. However, marriages between Muslim women and Christian men and marriages between any Muslim and a person whose faith does not include the existence of God (such as animism) are condemned on religious grounds. Although such marriages sometimes occur, especially in urban areas, they often lead to rifts within the couple's families. Christian ceremonies take place in a church and are performed by a priest. After the wedding, a festive reception is held. Food and drinks are served, and music played by a live band or on speakers. Guests bring gifts for the couple. Animist weddings are celebrated with elaborate feasts and singing and dancing, sometimes lasting up to three days.

Cultural traditions surrounding a wedding are determined by ethnic group. While each ethnic group has different traditions, there are a number of common elements. After the ceremony, the bride's friends come to her home to celebrate with food and gifts. The groom invites his friends to his home as well. The bride then moves in with her husband's family. The first time the bride goes to her husband's home, she is escorted by a female relative from her father's side of the family and by her friends. Two cars usually come to take the bride to her new home. The bride and her escort ride in the smaller car, while her friends ride in the bigger car, where they sing songs for the bride during the drive. The songs they sing traditionally tell of the challenges of married life. The groom generally organizes a small welcoming party for the bride at his family's home. Before the bride enters the home, friends, family members, and neighbors gather around to give her marriage advice. The day after the wedding, the bride's friends come to her new home for more celebrations. There is music, dancing, singing, and eating. A few days after the wedding, the couple goes to sign the legal papers and receive their marriage certificate.

Life Cycle

Pregnancy is not publicly discussed. The woman's mother is usually the first person to be told about the pregnancy. Some women may avoid leaving the home while they are visibly pregnant. A pregnant woman makes it a point to bundle up because wind is believed to be harmful to both her and the

baby. Rural women usually give birth at home with assistance from the village midwife. In urban areas, women commonly give birth in a hospital. Women try to stay home until the seventh day after giving birth, though rural women may return to their household work within a couple of days of giving birth, even if they cannot yet resume tasks in the fields.

A celebration takes place on the seventh day after the birth, when the infant is given a name. The child is held by the mother's sister while the village religious leader gives the child a name, which the parents have provided on the morning of the ceremony. He recites verses from the *Qur'an* and whispers the name into the baby's right ear. The naming is followed by a large feast featuring a slaughtered sheep or goat. This ceremony (called *ngente*, which means "to get out") is also a celebration for the new mother, who is not supposed to leave her room for seven days after giving birth. After the naming ceremony, she is free to "get out" and move about again. Children are often named after friends or relatives, which serves to strengthen bonds between people. Because of the stigma associated with out-of-wedlock pregnancies, the naming ceremony for a child born to an unwed mother is much smaller and celebrations are not held afterward.

For many children in Senegal, childhood is short. Adult roles are taken on early. Mothers teach their daughters to cook and keep a household from a very young age. Fathers generally teach their sons their trade and how to support a family. For girls, coming of age is represented by the first menstruation. Though less common than in the past, many boys still go through a circumcision ceremony sometime before the age of 16. In some cases, the ceremony is a month-long process. Several boys may stay in a secluded place in the nearby forest, where village elders teach them their duties as men. The circumcision rite is the culmination of this instruction. Once the boys have healed, they return to the village for a celebration. Some Senegalese celebrate a circumcision with a ceremony called *kasak*, a series of songs and dances. Two to three nights after the circumcision, the boys' families and friends gather around a fire. The circumcised boys (called *ndiulli*) sit on a mat accompanied by their guides (older boys who have already been circumcised and serve as mentors, called *selbe*). The attendees sing songs praising the boys on their bravery.

For Muslims, death is seen as the will of God and a chance for reinforcement of faith. When a person dies, female family members begin a long and loud wailing ritual. The sound serves two purposes: expressing the family's grief and notifying the community that someone has died. When a person dies, a burial takes place within 24 hours. The body is prepared by ritual cleansing in the family compound, wrapped in a white sheet, and carried by men to the burial ground. The body is buried along a north-south orientation with the head facing east, toward the Ka'aba (one of Islam's holiest sites), in the holy city of Mecca, Saudi Arabia. Only men accompany the body to the burial grounds. Verses of the *Qur'an* are read at the grave. Funerals are usually held at the home of the deceased three days after the death. Wealthier families may hold additional ceremonies on the eighth and fortieth days after the death. At the funeral, the *Qur'an* is read and prayers

are said for the soul of the deceased. Those who knew the deceased say a few words. For three days, friends and relatives gather to mourn.

Burial grounds are considered sacred, and people do not visit unless someone is being buried. Cremation is not practiced in Senegal. Widows are expected to be in mourning for four months and ten days. After this period, the widow may remarry if she chooses.

Diet

Food preparation and presentation are skills that Senegalese women learn at an early age. Each ethnic group has its own traditional dishes, and some urban women also cook French meals. Many believe wealth is measured by body size, because the wealthier the family, the more oil and rice can be used in preparing dishes. Meals usually consist of one main dish of rice, millet, or corn, covered with a sauce composed of vegetables, meat (traditional Muslims do not eat pork), poultry, fish, beans, or milk and sugar. A dessert of fruit and/or yogurt might be served. A popular dish is *yassa*: rice and chicken covered with a sauce made of sliced onions and spices. *Thiebou dien*, a meal of fish and rice, is a typical lunch dish. *Ceebu jeen* (translated as "rice and fish") is one of the country's most popular dishes. There are many variations, but most include fish stuffed with vegetables and seasonings and served over rice. A traditional Wolof dish is *mbaxal-u-Saloum*: a sauce of ground peanuts, dried fish, meat, tomatoes, and spices served with rice. Because rice is more expensive than other staple foods, it is generally reserved for lunch, the main meal of the day. Millet is more common at other meals.

Recreation

Traditional wrestling is Senegal's national sport. On Sundays, people gather to watch *ecurie* (wrestling groups or teams) compete. Soccer is the most popular sport. Senegalese avidly follow national and international soccer competitions. Many men play soccer informally on the weekends, and sometimes friendly competitions between neighborhoods are arranged. Other favorite sports are basketball and track-and-field. People enjoy watching and betting on wrestling matches. Many urban residents enjoy movies and books. Watching DVDs and attending concerts and dance clubs are popular in areas with electricity. After the harvest, rural families visit relatives in urban areas. They also enjoy dancing. Family and village celebrations, as well as the weekly market, provide the main form of recreation for most rural people. In urban areas, a growing number of people have access to the Internet for both business and recreation.

The Simbe (false lion) ceremony is a favorite diversion. People gather in a large public area, with three people dressed as lions in the center. Tickets are sold, but young people often do not purchase a ticket. The lions chase and catch those who have not purchased tickets, refusing to free them until another attendee agrees to purchase a ticket for them. The lions sing and dance throughout the ceremony.

The Arts

Senegalese songs are usually unwritten, and certain

instruments or musical styles (such as *yela* music for women) are reserved for specific genders or age groups. In the past, only *griots* could perform music. Their traditional role was transmitting oral history, genealogies and social rankings, diplomacy, and storytelling. Today, *griots* continue to participate in naming ceremonies, weddings, and funerals.

A type of drum called the *sabar* is played by the Wolof people and accompanied by dancing. Another popular instrument is the *kora* (a 21-string harp made of the calabash gourd). *Mbalax* music began as a tribal style using *sabar* drums but now incorporates a mix of Afro-Caribbean pop; it is popular in many parts of Africa.

Holidays

Senegal celebrates Islamic, Catholic, and national holidays, including New Year's Day, *Mawloud* (celebrating the prophet Muhammad's birth), Easter, Independence Day (4 Apr.), Labor Day (1 May), Ascension, All Saints' Day (1 Nov.), and Whitmonday. Muslims and Christians generally invite each other to take part in their religious celebrations.

Many Muslim holidays mark the end of an event. *Tabaski* marks the end of the *Hadj* (pilgrimage to Mecca). The head of each household sacrifices a sheep in honor of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son. *Korite* marks the end of the holy month of *Ramadan*, when Muslims go without food or drink from sunrise to sundown each day. Celebrations revolve around food, starting after the 9 a.m. prayer with a special breakfast (called *laax*) of millet with curdled milk, sugar, and the juice of the baobab fruit and ending with a lunch and dinner of lamb, beef, or chicken. After *laax*, is the *baalou akh* (forgiveness). The Senegalese believe that it's natural for people who live together to offend one another, whether intentionally or unintentionally. The *baalou akh* is a time for friends and neighbors to start fresh in their relationships. People go from house to house asking and granting forgiveness. In the afternoon, the *ndewenel* takes place. Children go from door to door receiving money. People wear traditional clothing in the afternoon on both *Tabaski* and *Korite*.

Tamkharit, the Islamic New Year, is also believed to be the day on which *Allah* determines people's destinies. Special prayers are said throughout the day. That night, people celebrate with a meal that includes sheep and a vegetable-couscous dish. At night, *Taajaboon* begins. Boys dress like girls and girls dress like boys, all applying ashes to their faces for a humorous look. They form small groups and go from house to house dancing. They receive rice, millet, and sugar as gifts. The group performs the *Taajaboon* song, which reminds people to behave well in their lives, as the end of the year is considered a time of judgment.

Islamic holidays follow the lunar calendar and thus fall on different dates each year, while Christian and secular holidays fall on the same day each year. For this reason, most Senegalese see Christmas as a natural conclusion to the year, so most people, regardless of religion, celebrate Christmas to some extent. Young people often organize Christmas parties for their friends of all religions. Easter is also widely celebrated. Christians reach out to their Muslim neighbors and friends, bringing gifts of *ngalax* (a sweet combination of

millet meal and peanut butter) and holding feasts of beef and mutton, because devout Muslims do not eat pork.

Independence Day is celebrated on April 4 and commemorates Senegal's independence from France in 1960. Patriotic parades take place throughout the country, and a main, televised parade takes place in the capital.

SOCIETY

Government

Senegal's president (currently Abdoulaye Wade) is head of state and elected to a five-year term by popular vote. The prime minister (currently Souleymane Ndene Ndiaye) is head of government and appointed by the president. Parliament is made up of a 150-seat National Assembly (*Assemblée Nationale*) and a 100-seat Senate. Members of Parliament are either directly elected, indirectly elected, appointed by the president, or elected by proportional representation (under which people cast votes in favor of political parties, and the number of seats awarded to a political party is based on the number of votes the party receives). An appointed cabinet also aids the president. Local chiefs and religious leaders provide rural leadership and judicial services. To the average person, local authority is often more important than departments of the central government. The voting age is 18.

Economy

The majority (more than 75 percent) of Senegal's labor force is engaged in agriculture. Since introduced by colonial powers, peanuts have remained the country's main cash crop and occupy much of the country's cropland. Other agricultural products include millet, corn, sorghum, cassava, cotton, rice, poultry, and vegetables. Senegal has one of the most developed manufacturing sectors in French West Africa. The most important industries include peanut oil extraction, phosphate mining, and food processing. Fish processing is the key component in Senegal's food industry. Senegal has one of the most stable economies in Africa. However, the economy faces many challenges, such as corruption, high rates of poverty, and widespread unemployment. Senegal uses West Africa's regional currency, the CFA *franc* (XOF).

Transportation and Communications

Paved roads link major cities, while inland villages are connected by unpaved paths and waterways. Efforts are underway to improve roads and bridges throughout the country. An airline serves the northern and southern coasts. A railroad system extends from Dakar to the north and to Mali in the east. Most people do not own cars; they travel by public transport (buses, taxis, or a minivan system for longer distances), horse and cart, bicycle, motorcycle, or on foot.

The government sponsors a daily newspaper, other political parties sponsor weekly papers, and an independent daily paper is also available. While most urban residents have access to information through print or television, villagers rely more on radio because they lack electricity and local postal services. Most rural people have access to daily radio news broadcasts in local languages. Also, oral or written

messages passed from person to person are an effective means of communication among villages. Cellular phones are quickly replacing landlines. In urban areas, nearly everyone has a cellular phone. There is cell phone reception in a growing number of rural areas.

Education

Many (predominantly rural) Senegalese see school as being irrelevant to their daily activities, so they drop out early. Attendance is also affected by the need for children to work in the fields, a distrust of secular (versus religious) education, teacher strikes calling for better wages and working conditions, and other factors. The gap between female and male literacy has been narrowing in recent years as a result of government campaigns to encourage families to keep their girls in school. About 73 percent of all children enter primary school, and about 56 percent finish. Enrollment drops sharply in secondary school.

Senegal's educational system is based on the French model. Classes are taught in French, so most of the literate population has learned to read and write in French. However, French typically is not spoken in the home, and most children do not speak it when they begin school, which hampers early learning. Officials hesitate to replace French because they fear most ethnic groups would resist an educational system based on a single ethnic language. In addition, they believe dropping French would isolate Senegal from the rest of the world. Children often attend *Qur'anic* schools, where they study Islam and learn some Arabic, though these schools are not recognized as part of the formal educational system. Growing in popularity are schools that place an emphasis on the *Qur'an* within the formal system.

Children start primary school at age six. At about age 12, students enter secondary school, which lasts seven years. Students begin learning English in their first year of secondary school. In their third year, they choose another foreign language to study. Students take the BFEM exam in their fourth year of secondary school. The results of this exam determine if the student will continue on to vocational school or three more years of secondary school. In the last year of secondary school, they specialize in either the sciences or the arts and take the Baccalaureate exam, which determines where they will attend a university. Cheating is rare and is seen as bringing shame to the student and the family. Most students pursue fields of study related to their high school specializations. Some choose to enroll in professional training at private colleges. University education is free for students who are accepted. However, students who graduate from universities often struggle to find a job in their field.

Health

Although health conditions are improving, diseases and infections continue to afflict many Senegalese, particularly those in rural areas who cannot afford or do not have access to modern medical treatment. Most physicians practice in Dakar. While doctors in Dakar have access to modern facilities, rural healthcare facilities often lack equipment and medical supplies. Villagers rely on traditional healers and cures for many ailments. A growing number of women

receive prenatal care. Rural women generally give birth in their village with the help of a midwife. In urban areas, most women give birth in a hospital.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

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POPULATION & AREA

Population	12,323,252 (rank=71)
Area, sq. mi.	75,955 (rank=87)
Area, sq. km.	196,722

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	144 of 182 countries
Gender inequality rank	113 of 155 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$1,900
Adult literacy rate	51% (male); 29% (female)
Infant mortality rate	58 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	58 (male); 61 (female)

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