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## **GABON CULTURAL FIELD GUIDE**

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## **Foreword**

The Gabon Cultural Field Guide is designed to provide deploying military personnel an overview of Gabon's cultural terrain. In this field guide, Gabon's cultural history has been synopsisized to capture the more significant aspects of the country's cultural environment, with emphasis on factors having the greatest potential to impact operations.

The field guide presents background information to show the Gabon mind-set through its history, language, and religion. It also contains practical sections on lifestyle, customs and habits. For those seeking more extensive information, MCIA produces a series of cultural intelligence studies on Gabon that explore the dynamics of Gabon culture at a deeper level.



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# CULTURAL FIELD GUIDE: THE REPUBLIC OF GABON

Gabon is a small country roughly the size of Colorado (268,000 square kilometers) located along the Gulf of Guinea in Central Africa. Gabon borders Equatorial Guinea and Cameroon to the north and the Republic of the Congo to the south and east. The climate in Gabon is typical of an equatorial zone; temperatures are hot, and the air is humid during the rainy season. During the dry season, the air is dryer and cooler with overcast skies. The rainy season typically occurs from September to January and February to June. The dry season lasts from June to September, with a shorter dry season in January and February.

Gabon is one of the most sparsely populated countries in Africa, with a population density averaging less than five people per square kilometer. According to official estimates, Gabon is home to 1.3 million people and has an annual population growth rate of 2.5 percent. Gabon's gross domestic product (GDP) is US\$60 billion annually, four times greater than the regional average; however, this benefits only a small percentage of the population. The high GDP makes Gabon ineligible for many international aid programs, despite the fact that many Gabonese live in poverty and have a relatively low life expectancy. More than 40 different ethnic groups live in Gabon. All Gabonese ethnic groups speak *Bantu* languages with the exception of some *Pygmy* groups. Communities of hunters and gatherers (also known as *Pygmies* in English, or *Batwa* in Bantu languages) in Gabon have close relationships with neighboring farm communities and are increasingly settling into permanent villages. The largest ethnic group is the *Fang* (pronounced "Fawn'g"), a *Bantu*-speaking group.

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## Gabon

Gabon is well known for its natural resources, including significant quantities of oil, uranium, manganese, and timber. Most Gabonese live in urban areas, and vast regions of the country are uninhabited. Rainforest covers more than 80 percent of Gabon, making it one of the most heavily forested countries in the region. The areas with the highest population densities are the urban centers of Libreville, Port-Gentil, and Franceville. Gabon's earliest European settlement and contemporary capital, Libreville, was

founded as a French and Gabonese commercial outpost in 1849. Today, Libreville is Gabon's largest urban area.

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## **CURRENT TRENDS**

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Gabon has a vibrant and evolving culture. Traditional social, political, and cultural norms are continually evolving in response to internal and external influences. Some current trends impacting these norms are:

**Authoritarian government and centralized power:** Since Gabon was granted independence in 1961, only three men have served as president. The most significant of these was El Hadj Omar Bongo Ondimba, who ruled for 42 years (1967–2009). Bongo established an authoritarian government with centralized power. Rural populations and members of the opposition have struggled to achieve meaningful changes in the government. In September 2009, Bongo's son Ali Ben Bongo Ondimba succeeded him.

**Urbanization:** During the colonial era and in the past several decades, Gabon has experienced rapid urbanization. The movement of large numbers of people to urban areas is undermining traditional ethnic, clan, and regional ties. At the same time, new social networks are forming based on shared urban experiences.

**Petroleum industry:** Gabon's GDP and national budget are almost entirely funded by the petroleum industry. Petroleum supplies and revenues have begun to decline in recent decades. It is unclear how Gabon will respond to the loss of this source of financing, although several government projects aimed at filling this gap have been debated since the 1990s.

**Poverty:** Although Gabon has an educated and affluent elite, most Gabonese live in poverty. There is a large divide between the rich and poor in Gabon, as well as between urban and rural populations.

**Importance of ethnic and clan ties:** Although urbanization is creating new social networks, clan and ethnic ties help many Gabonese succeed in modern life. Ethnic identities assumed political significance during the colonial era. Today, clan and ethnic affiliations may help a Gabonese citizen secure a job or political support.

**Western influences:** Gabon has been heavily influenced by colonialism and French culture. Today, external influences continue to be important. Many Gabonese are open to Western, particularly American, culture.

**Xenophobia:** Always distrustful of outsiders, the Gabonese are becoming increasingly xenophobic and resentful of foreigners. They particularly resent illegal immigrants and migrants from West Africa and Lebanon, who reside in large numbers in urban areas.

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## **IDENTITY AND AFFILIATIONS**

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### **Ethnic Group Identities**

Ethnic affiliation is one of the most important factors in Gabonese identity. More than 40 different ethnic groups reside in Gabon. Although customs and cultural practices are similar across groups, many Gabonese identify strongly with their ethnic group. Gabon has no significant history of large-scale ethnic conflict, which is partially due to the country's small population and large geographical distances between ethnic groups. Another contributing factor is the political culture initiated by Leon Mba in the 1950s and 1960s, which emphasized the creation of balance between the ethnic groups. In addition, rapid urbanization has led to a sense

of Gabonese nationalism that is beginning to overshadow ethnic identification, mainly among the youth in urban areas.

In addition to ethnic affiliation, pride in one's regional origin is a key source of Gabonese identity. For example, although Gabonese typically trust others from the same ethnic group, an individual living in the *Woleu N'Tem* province will not automatically trust an individual living in the *Estuary* province, even if both people are members of the *Fang* ethnic group. Gabonese typically place most of their trust in others from the same ethnic group and the same region. Gabonese also belong to many other "communities of choice," such as groups of friends, mutual savings societies, initiation societies, churches, political parties, unions, and neighborhoods, all of which contribute to their identities. In addition, many groups have developed common traits and behaviors based on the type of lifestyle in a given region (e.g., farming or fishing).

### ***Major Ethnic Groups (Bantu Speaking)***

The *Bantu*-speaking group originated from the area that today is the Nigeria-Cameroon border. A series of migrations of *Bantu*-speaking groups began in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and continued through the present era. Villages relocated over many decades, resulting in Gabon's current ethnic makeup. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, migrations accelerated southward and westward in response to increased opportunities for exchanges with European traders. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, colonial rule initiated labor migrations to colonial towns and lumber and mining camps in the south and west. Today, as a result of these migrations, *Bantu*-speaking groups dominate the Gabonese population. Key *Bantu*-speaking groups include the *Fang*, *Myené*, *Nzébi*, *Mpongwé*, *Teke*, *Punu*, and *Obamba*.

The *Fang* is the largest ethnic group and makes up more than one-fifth of the Gabonese population. The largest *Fang* populations live in Libreville and the *Estuary* region along the coast. Many also reside in the *Woleu N'Tem* region in the north, which is known for its agricultural productivity, most notably its coffee plantations. The *Fang* also have a significant presence in both neighboring Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea. Many *Fang* claim to have an ancient East African or Egyptian origin. While contemporary scholars contest these findings, during the colonial period, many scholars argued in favor of these origins. Many *Fang* believe these roots lend them prestige.

Despite the generally good ethnic relations among the Gabonese, tension does exist between many *Fang* and other ethnic groups. In general, non-*Fang* communities fear that the *Fang* will gain too much political power. The *Fang*, for their part, are somewhat disgruntled by their continuous characterization as the opposition group in the national government. Many *Fang* believed that when President Omar Bongo Ondimba, an ethnic *Téké*, died, it was time for a *Fang* president to be elected. They were dissatisfied when Ali Ben Bongo Ondimba, Omar Bongo Ondimba's son, came to power. However, some *Fang* support the Bongos and remain loyal to their political party.

The late President Bongo Ondimba and his son Ali Ben Bongo Ondimba are members of the *Téké* ethnic group, which, like the *Fang*, is a *Bantu*-speaking group. They are also natives of the relatively marginal *Haut-Ogoué* province. The *Téké* is a minority group in Gabon, although significant *Téké* communities reside in neighboring Congo. As a member of this minority group, President Bongo had to form a coalition of ethnic groups to counter the power and influence of the numerically dominant *Fang*. Even so, this ruling coalition has made concessions to the *Fang*, such as nominating a *Fang* from the *Estuary* region as the prime minister.

## Pygmy Groups

*Pygmies* were perhaps the earliest inhabitants of Gabon; however, only a few thousand *Pygmies* remain in the country. They resided primarily in rural areas and made their living through hunting and gathering. They also traded with local farmers, providing them natural goods, such as meat and honey, in exchange for agricultural and manufactured goods, such as food, cloth, weapons, and cigarettes. Although *Pygmies* are historically nomadic, government pressure in recent years has led many *Pygmy* groups to settle in semi-permanent villages, often alongside *Bantu* villages. Permanent settlement has led to greater assimilation with farming communities and the loss of some traditional *Pygmy* practices. For example, *Pygmy* children are encouraged to speak local *Bantu* languages rather than *Pygmy* languages. Today, *Pygmies* are beginning to engage in paid labor, and their participation in traditional forest activities is declining. However, a lack of education limits *Pygmy* migration to urban areas. Vastly outnumbered by *Bantu*-speaking peoples, *Pygmies* believe they have been politically, culturally, and economically marginalized. The most well-known *Pygmy* groups are the *Baka*, *Babongo*, *Bakola*, *Bagama*, and *Barimba*.

*Pygmies* are paradoxically both revered and scorned by other Gabonese. *Pygmies* are strongly associated with elements of nature and are well known for their knowledge of the forest, particularly their familiarity with the mystical forces be-



**Pygmies Circa 1920**

lieved to reside in the forest. *Pygmies* are also well known for their knowledge and skills related to medicine and healing, highly guarded practices within the Gabonese culture. At the same time, the Gabonese view *Pygmies* as uneducated, uncivilized, and inferior. *Pygmies* are often thought of as less than human and are usually considered the “property” of the nearest farming groups.

## **Foreign Nationals**

Gabon’s relatively small indigenous population and Gabonese resistance to certain avenues of employment have encouraged foreign nationals and expatriates to settle in the country. The Gabonese, regardless of their background and education, generally aspire to be employed in the civil service. They look down on many professions in the service industry, such as driving taxis, and feel that employment in those fields is beneath them. As a result, foreigners have taken advantage of the economic opportunities overlooked by many Gabonese.

Approximately 20 percent of Gabon’s population is non-Gabonese; more than 200,000 foreign nationals are employed in Gabon. Of these, more than 100,000 are Africans, including workers from Senegal, Mali, Togo, Benin, Ghana, Nigeria, and Cameroon. Gabon is also home to foreign nationals from France, Lebanon, Malaysia, Libya, and China. Foreigners dominate the merchant class and own and operate most of the profitable businesses.

The Chinese have a significant presence in Gabon, primarily of an economic nature. The Chinese are interested in Gabon’s natural reserves of oil, manganese, and timber, and they have recently increased their involvement and investment in Gabon. While the government views this positively, average Gabonese citizens resent it because the Chinese frequently import their own workforces rather than create jobs for the Gabonese.



The Gabonese have mixed feelings toward foreign inhabitants and distrust outsiders. Although most Gabonese concede that their own population cannot provide suitable workers for many positions, many Gabonese resent immigrants because they represent an economic threat. Immigrants from West Africa, many in Gabon illegally, are often the focus of resentment because they represent an unskilled migrant population competing with unskilled Gabonese for low-paying jobs. Gabonese fear that West African migrants will steal their jobs and try to marry Gabonese women. However, most Gabonese still depend on West African shops and markets for their day-to-day needs. In contrast, most Gabonese are relatively welcoming of French-speaking or financially wealthy expatriates, although resentment of the French presence has grown in recent years. In general, resentment of foreigners is higher among poor or underprivileged Gabonese than among Gabonese who are wealthy and educated.

This resentment has periodically resulted in violence directed toward foreigners. For instance, after the 2009 election of President Ali Ben Bongo Ondimba, many Gabonese resented what they perceived as French interference in Gabonese politics. The resulting protests in Port-Gentil targeted gas stations owned by the French petroleum company *Total*. During times of economic hardship, Gabonese may instigate attacks against immigrants, particularly those from Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, and Lebanon, all of whom are easy to identify and usually economically successful. Nigerians may be targeted because of their popular association with illegal activities. Prosperous Chinese workers have not yet been the targets of violence. Most foreigners are aware of their somewhat precarious status as non-citizens and are content to work hard and remain politically inactive.

U.S. persons are well received and not specifically targeted for violence because the Gabonese associate them with programs such as the Peace Corps and various missionary programs, which they view positively. Americans mistaken for French citizens can be at a greater risk. Regardless, all Americans should realize they are perceived as very wealthy by Gabonese standards.

## Language

French is the official language of Gabon and the language of the government and the educational system. The Gabonese are known internationally as some of the most fluent French speakers in Africa. French serves as a linguistic bridge between the numerous Gabonese ethnic groups, which speak dialects of different languages. French is considered a formal language, although it is increasingly used inside the home in urban areas. Fluency in French is more common among educated and urban Gabonese; therefore, the ability to speak formal French indicates high status. Lower-class Gabonese speak slang versions of French intermixed with local languages.

In addition to French, local languages are spoken throughout Gabon. With the exception of some urban dwellers whose first language is French, most Gabonese, including *Pygmies*, speak *Bantu* languages. Only the *Baka Pygmy* group in northern Gabon speaks a non-*Bantu* language. Roughly 50 *Bantu* dialects are spoken in Gabon. Local dialects are used in non-formal settings within the household or within certain regions. For example, *Myene* is the dominant local dialect in Libreville, whereas *Fang* is the dominant local dialect in Port-Gentil and the *Woleu N'Tem* region. In part of southern Gabon, the dialects of *Teke*, *Punu*, and *Nzebi* are common. Gabon has no dominant language, though French is popular in all regions. In many cases, younger generations do not learn ethnic dialects. This is particularly true in urban areas where some

children are raised to speak only French. In addition, English is becoming increasingly popular among the Gabonese.

## **Religion and Belief Systems**

Although most Gabonese self-identify as Catholic, religious identity in Gabon varies. Most people practice a mixture of traditional and Christian religions. Beginning in the early colonial years, Christian missionaries and mission schools had a significant presence in Gabon. Many Gabonese found financial and social assistance at Christian missions from the 1880s onward. This time period saw the largest conversion of Gabonese to Christianity. Despite the important role of Christianity, most Gabonese continue to value traditional ritual practices and religious beliefs.

Traditional Gabonese religious customs are animist in nature and encompass a belief in individuals with supernatural powers and healing practices. Many Gabonese also believe in powerful sorcerers who can transform themselves into ferocious animals such as elephants and leopards. These widely held beliefs are found at all levels of society.

Initiation societies are a significant part of Gabonese religious and social lives. Most societies are gender based and generally do not share their ritual secrets with one another. Nationally, most elite Gabonese are members of a ritual society. Locally, most leaders are members of ritual societies, and during society meetings, community issues may be discussed. These societies are present in urban as well as rural areas.

The most well-known ritual society in Gabon is Bwiti, which is popular among members of the Fang ethnic group. Bwiti was originally practiced by non-Fang groups in southern Gabon; however, during the early colonial era it spread to Fang communities. Bwiti is now most closely associated with Fang populations.



**Bwiti Religious Ritual (Photo by Romain Briard)**

Bwiti, a form of ancestor worship and a village-wide celebration of the past, is a combination of traditional Fang spiritual practices and Christian rituals. Individuals ask to be initiated into Bwiti if they believe they are being harmed by mystical forces. Bwiti ceremonies in urban areas take place in and around temples known as mbandja. Bwiti initiation rituals can last several days, beginning mid-week and culminating in a large celebration on Saturday. During a ceremony, initiates spend several nights ingesting iboga, a hallucinogenic drug. Under the influence of this drug, they enter into a trance-like state and speak to ancestors and other mystical spirits. Crowds of people, also in a trance-like state,

chant and dance. On Saturday evenings, celebrations often take place at Bwiti temples, even if no one is being initiated. In urban areas, these celebrations are often loud but are generally contained in the temple or in the immediate area of the temple. Participants may reenact mystical combats during a ceremony, but no acts of violence spread beyond the ceremony. In rural areas, Bwiti celebrations take place outdoors in the forest. They may be loud and involve larger crowds of people, but they are peaceful and important religious ceremonies.

Masonic lodges in Gabon are closely associated with political power. Gabon has two lodges: Dialogue and Rite Equatorial. Lodges are important sources of patronage for members. The late President Bongo was the grand master of the Dialogue Lodge and indirectly controlled the Rite Equatorial Lodge. As a result, he commanded the loyalty of all the Masonic members. Bongo required all male members of his political party to become members of the Dialogue Lodge, strengthening his authority over them. Masonic lodges serve as political links to France. The French introduced lodges to Gabon during the colonial era and accepted Gabonese members as early as the 1920s. Gabonese Masons have connections with French political leaders and have access to French financial resources.

A small number of Muslims live in Gabon. Most are immigrants from West Africa, notably from Senegal and Mali, and a small population of Muslims is from Lebanon. The late President Bongo converted to Islam in 1973 after completing the *hajj* (Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca) and officially changing his name to El Hadj Omar Bongo Ondimba. However, it is generally believed that he converted to gain the favor of leaders in key Muslim countries and facilitate Gabon's entrance to the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), rather than for religious reasons.



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### **Mosque in Libreville**

Nevertheless, being nominally Muslim did not hinder his ability to rule a predominantly Christian country. The current president, Ali Ben Bongo Ondimba, is also Muslim.

## **The Influence of Religion**

In Gabon, rituals and religion are closely tied to political power and leadership. The Gabonese believe that one cannot be a political leader without also having significant ritual powers. Nearly all elite members of Gabonese society are members of a ritual sect. As a result, showing disrespect for rituals will offend not only lower-class rural and urban Gabonese but also elite business owners and politicians.

Religious ceremonies and rituals are community affairs; community and political issues may be discussed, and important decisions are made during ritual or religious gatherings.

Outside observers who concentrate on official and public connections may fail to notice the significance of less visible networks based on ritual group membership.

Many Gabonese consider themselves to be devout Christians or Muslims. However, even devout Gabonese mix elements of traditional belief systems and mysticism with Christian and Islamic beliefs. They see no contradiction between these beliefs and feel the mixture of belief systems in no way lessens one's perceived devoutness.

Many Gabonese believe occult forces are crucial to ensure electoral success. Ritual murders are widely thought to take place for the purpose of obtaining body parts and blood to create "medicines" that enhance one's mystical powers. Rumors of child abductions and human sacrifices may be spread leading up to important events



**Fang Christians, 1912**

and elections or in times of political crisis. However, these rumors are often based on false accusations. Ritual murders are not as frequent as some Gabonese claim. Most Gabonese consider these practices to be abhorrent.

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## **HISTORICAL ERAS**

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The Gabonese have mixed feelings about their cultural history. Many are pleased to be living in a developing country and have embraced Western culture. However, the Gabonese are also proud of their heritage and feel that they risk losing their own traditions by accepting Western influences.

### **Pre-colonial Era**

Pre-colonial Gabonese society was characterized by extended clans living in villages dispersed throughout the savannah and rainforest. During this period, most Gabonese practiced hunting, gathering, and mixed farming. There was no centralized government or economy. Historical narratives from this period are extremely localized and passed down through oral tradition by elders. Pre-colonial history is bound up with migration narratives, local genealogies, and clan memberships, and is centered on clan leaders and local conflicts. Clan and regional affiliations provided the political fabric of a person's identity. Ethnic labels were largely created by the French colonialists and were not adopted by the Gabonese as a means of self-identifying until the latter part of the colonial era.

The lucrative trade opportunities that accompanied the arrival of Portuguese and other European traders in the late 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> centuries altered the lives of most Gabonese. Libreville, the contemporary capital of Gabon, began as a small trading port in



the *Estuary* region along the coast. Trade opportunities in the *Estuary* region spurred migrations of *Fang* groups to the *Estuary* region and the *Woleu N'Tem* agricultural region in the north. The *Fang* dominate these areas in contemporary Gabon. The *Mpongwé*, a smaller *Bantu* group that formerly dominated the *Estuary* region and was the initial beneficiary of early European trade, was forced to accommodate the *Fang* migration. Today, the *Mpongwé* remain wary of the *Fang* presence and have formed political alliances to limit *Fang* dominance.

Christian missionaries arrived in Gabon along with European traders. Catholic and Protestant mission schools were founded in Libreville in the mid-1800s. By the 1900s, French mission schools began instructing the growing Gabonese elite. These schools gave select Gabonese a European-style education, enabling them to achieve professional advancement in the colony. Most missionary schools were located along the coast and in the northern regions, and thus, at least initially, the *Myene* and *Fang* groups had the greatest access to them. Over the years, mission schools were set up throughout Gabon, giving a larger portion of the population access to education. The education provided by mission schools enabled men like Leon Mba, the first president of Gabon, to achieve social and political advantage over traditional elders. Eventually, the French set up public educational institutions in Gabon, increasing the number of educated Gabonese from all ethnic groups. This is largely responsible for the ethnic diversity of educated Gabonese today.

## **French Colonialism**

The French colonial era is arguably the most influential era in the history of Gabon. While other Europeans were present as traders from the 15<sup>th</sup> century onward, French traders did not arrive until the 1840s. At this time, France began consolidating power

by employing traditional authority figures, such as clan leaders, to help control the country. Although the clan leaders resisted, France's superior military power eventually prevailed, and by the 1920s France controlled the entire region. Initially, French rule was accompanied by several concessionary companies that had been granted exclusive trading rights in the region, enabling them to force Africans to collect rubber, ivory, and other products for their benefit. However, these companies ruled with brutal force and were economically unsuccessful. Gabon officially became a territory of French Equatorial Africa in 1910.

With its abundance of natural resources, Gabon became a vital French colony. The French developed Gabon's economy to depend on trade, particularly trade with France. Gabon exported raw materials and imported manufactured goods. Thus, Gabon became dependent on France to purchase its natural resources and failed to develop an internal manufacturing industry. France profited greatly from the sales of Gabonese oil and timber. The French-owned energy company *Total* (then known as *Elf*) played a key role in the development of these economic and trade relationships. In the 1970s, France remained particularly interested in Gabon's abundant supplies of petroleum and established preferential agreements with Gabonese leaders to maintain France's unparalleled access to Gabon's petroleum in the post-independence era.

The French colonial era also had a profound social and cultural impact on Gabon. Political and power structures were altered as France began to establish a centralized state structure in Gabon. Rural Gabonese were encouraged to alter their livelihoods from those based on local, small-scale agriculture to plantation agriculture, extraction of natural resources, and wage labor. The colonial government relocated and grouped many rural villages closer to roads. These efforts were made to increase the profitability of larger

scale agriculture and encourage employment in mining and timber camps. Many rural Gabonese still resent these forced relocations and blame French policies for the hardships they endured in the process. Urban residents, meanwhile, were encouraged to adopt European language and customs. Colonial administrators encouraged elites to learn French and undertake a European-style education. Fluency in French became an important element of assimilation and advancement. A network of elite Gabonese developed with strong cultural and political ties to France and French interests.

As the colonial presence became entrenched in Gabon, particularly in Libreville, new forms of employment became popular. Mission-educated Gabonese found well-paying jobs with European commercial firms. Employment opportunities were also available within government administrations in Gabon as well as throughout colonial Africa. Libreville became a center for employment and was known for producing highly sought-after African colonial administrators and clerks. Positions as clerks and administrators helped educated Gabonese earn money and prestige. This type of employment also provided an avenue toward becoming politically active and helped create the elite Gabonese political class that dominates the country today.

### ***Contemporary Relationship with France***

Economic and social ties with France remain strong in contemporary Gabon. The French maintain a strong political and economic influence in the country in order to retain access to Gabon's abundant natural resources. Today, a significant French expatriate population resides in Gabon. French residents own and run many of the profitable restaurants and hotels frequented by wealthy urban residents. Although some Gabonese resent the contemporary French presence, most accept French political and economic in-

volvement as an unavoidable fact. Nevertheless, this resentment may lead to acts of violence in times of political tension or transition. For instance, following the election of President Ali Ben Bongo Ondimba in 2009, rioters and protesters targeted French personnel and facilities with violence. This was likely due to the perception among Gabonese that the French supported Ali Ben and assisted his rise to power.

In Gabon, French expatriates interact within closed social networks, enjoying a lifestyle that is beyond the reach of most Gabonese. They are sometimes viewed as taking well-paying jobs away from locals. However, Gabonese do admire the French, particularly their cultural and scholarly traditions. For instance, many Gabonese intellectuals choose to further their studies in France, thus reinforcing the cultural and scholarly ties between the two countries. Exposure to French culture remains a status indicator for elite Gabonese.

Today, while French influence remains strong, most Gabonese also feel a growing sense of nationalism. Gabon was unified during the French colonial era when residents of the Estuary province began to think of themselves as Gabonese. At that time, rural people with no French education were not considered Gabonese. A national identity began to spread slowly, and today the population as a whole identifies as Gabonese.

## **Impact of French Cultural Influence**

Evidence of strong French cultural and political influence originating in the colonial era can still be found throughout Gabon.

- French is Gabon's official language. Gabon is home to 10 distinct *Bantu* language groups, further divided into 50 regional varieties. In many cases, speakers of one variety do

not understand other varieties. French serves as a means for members of these different groups to communicate with each other.

- French fluency and familiarity with French customs are status symbols. The Gabonese generally accept French expatriates and seek opportunities to work with French business interests.
- The Gabonese educational system is based on the French model. Most elite Gabonese attend university in France or other French-speaking countries.
- French advisers hold key government positions, and France has a military base on the outskirts of Libreville.

## Independence

Gabon experienced a peaceful transition to independence on 17 August 1960, and has maintained close economic and political ties to France. During the later years of the colonial era, Gabonese intellectuals educated in French traditions began embracing the ideas of self-governance, independence, and democracy. However, unlike in many other African colonies, an anti-colonialist movement never developed in Gabon. Although nationalist par-



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**Gabon's National Flag, Adopted in the 1960s, Represents Natural Resources (Green), Sun (Yellow), and Sea (Blue)**

ties did form in the 1950s, their rhetoric was not anti-French, nor was it pro-Socialist. Thus, France was able to engineer Gabon's transition to independence, and the centralized state infrastructure was maintained.

### ***Presidency of Leon Mba***

Leon Mba was the first president of independent Gabon. Mba, an *Estuary Fang* and former customs agent, was a member of the French-educated Gabonese elite. Because of the strength of his influence in the 1930s and 1940s, he was threatening to the colonial administration, which exiled him to the Central African Republic. Mba returned to Gabon after World War II and reinforced his ties to France. Mba was proud of his connection to France, and during the independence process he sought to maintain Gabon's close connections to French interests. Mba designed policies to protect France's economic interests in Gabon as well as the political and economic interests of fellow elite, French-speaking Gabonese. During Mba's term in office, his political party, the Gabonese Democratic Bloc (*Bloc Démocratique Gabonais* or BDG) dominated the government with the firm backing of the French. Economic relations between the two countries remained much the same as they had during the colonial era.

In 1964, the Gabonese military staged a coup, seizing Mba and forcing him to resign the presidency. The coup was inspired by the widespread negative response to Mba's autocratic and Franco-ophile policies. It was rumored that Mba's main political opponent, Jean-Hilaire Aubame, may have been involved in planning and executing the coup; however, this was never confirmed. Regardless of Aubame's earlier involvement, once Mba was seized, military leaders asked Aubame to form a provisional government and use his contacts to secure France's cooperation with the coup. Military

leaders believed the French, who had not responded to a coup in neighboring French Congo the previous year, would not interfere with Gabonese internal affairs. However, the French did respond to the coup with immediate and overwhelming force. In fewer than 48 hours, the coup was reversed and Mba was restored to power. Following Mba's return to power, the leaders of the coup, including Aubame, were imprisoned or exiled. After his release from prison in 1972, Aubame lived out the remainder of his days in France and had no further involvement in Gabonese political affairs.

## **Contemporary Era**

Today, Gabon is one of the few economically stable countries in Central Africa and has a relatively high GDP for sub-Saharan Africa. However, this stability belies a significant divide between a small number of wealthy Gabonese and the impoverished masses. It is estimated that only 2 percent of Gabon's population controls the country's resources and wealth. A significant minority (roughly 20 percent) of the population is composed of foreign nationals earning a middle-class living as merchants or small-business owners. In contrast, nearly 80 percent of the population lives in poverty with little access to health services, educational opportunities, or other resources. This divide is known locally as the Bongo System, or *Bongoïsme*, referencing the fact that only people close to the late President Omar Bongo Ondimba have access to wealth and resources through lucrative government employment or financial patronage.

### ***Presidency of Omar Bongo Ondimba***

El Hajj Omar Bongo Ondimba, then Albert Bernard Bongo, became president on 28 November 1967. Bongo, the second president of Gabon, served as head of state for more than four decades. The Gabonese believe that the French were responsible for Bon-

go's ascension to the presidency. In 1967, President Mba fell ill with cancer, and the French African Affairs adviser recommended making Bongo the vice president, which ensured he would become president after Mba's death. Bongo had roots in southeastern Gabon, a strategically significant region with extensive supplies of uranium and manganese, making him an ideal ally for French leaders who wanted to ensure access to Gabon's natural resources. When President Mba passed away, Bongo ascended to the presidency. While most Gabonese respected the office of the president, some believed the French had engineered Bongo's presidency to serve their interests rather than the desires of the Gabonese people.

Bongo's policies, personal charisma, and four-decade term as president left an indelible mark on Gabonese society and reinforced the notion that Gabon is an autocratic regime. Although Bongo's predecessor, Leon Mba, had begun consolidating power and moving toward a single party system, it was Bongo who truly established autocratic rule. As president, Bongo exercised a pervasive influence over every aspect of governance and social policy in Gabon. His policies were conservative in nature and emphasized Gabonese national unity. Bongo referred to himself as "*le père de la nation*," the father of the nation, drawing on the traditional notion that family members must obey their father, thus implying that all Gabonese citizens should obey him. Bongo subjected the citizens to an endless barrage of political slogans and advertisements, including the official music of his *Parti Démocratique Gabonais* (Gabonese Democratic Party, PDG). He tightly controlled the media, particularly the newspapers, shutting down any media venture that criticized his regime. The public was encouraged to not only support but also adore and celebrate the president. Today, most Gabonese view him as an autocratic dictator who used his position



to increase his own wealth while most Gabonese lived in poverty. Many Gabonese resented Bongo's long rule and hoped his death would be a catalyst for lasting change in Gabon.

As president, Bongo altered Gabon's political environment in two significant ways. He established a single-party political system based on the PDG, which he encouraged every member of the government to join, and he outlawed all other political parties. During this time, political affiliations were limited to those who supported the Gabonese government and those who opposed it. Members of the PDG party had access to state patronage at all levels of government.

In the early 1990s, however, popular pressure forced the regime to allow for a more democratic system. The government negotiated with the main opposition group, *Les Bûcherons* (the Woodcutters), which was composed predominantly of *Fang* from the *Woleu-N'Tem* region, to open a National Conference in March–April 1990 that would again allow for a multi-party political system. After Joseph Rendjambé, leader of the Port-Gentil-based opposition party *Parti Gabonais du Progrès*, was assassinated in a hotel in Libreville on 23 May 1990, violent riots erupted in Port-Gentil. The French consul was taken hostage, 1,800 of the 2,000 French expatriates in the city were repatriated to France, and the French government sent several hundred troops in Gabon to protect French citizens. The riots were contained but erupted again during the fraudulent legislative elections in October 1990. From 1991 to 1993, the country was very close to an open civil war, with relentless strikes from teachers, magistrates, students, and workers at the Elf Gabon energy plant. Bongo won the presidential elections in December 1993 and, with difficulty, managed to reign in the opposition, mostly through the brutal repression of demonstrations. The 1990–1993 events discouraged the Gabonese and re-enforced

fears that they could never truly impact or change the political system that governed them. Today, the PDG is still dominant, but it is contested by other important political parties.

Current opposition to the regime and the PDG is centered in the city of Port-Gentil, commonly referred to as the “city of the opposition.” Its residents are willing to speak out, most likely because their livelihoods are tied to the petroleum industry rather than to government civil service. Not surprisingly, Port-Gentil was the site of post-election riots in 2009.

Bongo also renegotiated the nature of Gabon’s relationship with France. Although France and Gabon remained key allies, Bongo took small steps to assert his country’s independence and curtail French oversight. He ended France’s exclusive rights to Gabon’s supply of uranium and limited France’s oversight of Gabonese foreign policy. Bongo also supported smaller initiatives, such as expelling a token French teacher, as a show of independence from French authority. Nevertheless, ties between Gabon and France remained strong, and French nationals remained in key positions throughout Bongo’s government.

### **Impact of the Bongo Regime**

El Hajj Omar Bongo Ondimba served as head of state for more than four decades and left an indelible mark on Gabon’s history



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**Gabon's Coat of Arms**

and culture. His sustained leadership impacted Gabonese society in the following ways:

President Bongo was skilled at using his financial resources to secure and maintain allies. This set a precedent for future leaders who wish to secure cooperation with the government. This precedent limits the funds available to the government for development and infrastructure projects. It also challenges current and future presidents who must maintain these patronage relationships in the face of declining oil revenues, the main source of government wealth.

President Bongo's methods of retaining power have left the Gabonese feeling that they have few legitimate means of influencing the government or bringing about social or political change. As a result, many people turn to rioting or violent protests to make their voices heard.

Many groups opposed the rule of President Bongo—the most notorious being the *Fang*. After 42 years as the opposition group, the *Fang* felt it was entitled to have one of its own as president. Many *Fang* oppose Ali Ben Bongo Ondimba and resent their continued alienation from political leadership. Opposition to the Bongo regime continues outside of the *Fang* ethnic group, mainly in urban areas such as Libreville and Port-Gentil.

### ***Presidency of Ali Ben Bongo Ondimba***

Ali Ben Bongo Ondimba is the eldest son of former President Omar Bongo Ondimba and served as minister of defense for his father. After his father's death from natural causes, Ali Ben was elected as the third president of Gabon on 30 August 2009. Despite claims of electoral fraud and a recount of votes, the constitutional court upheld his election, and Ali Ben was sworn in on 16 October 2009. This outcome angered many Gabonese, who reacted with

riots and violence immediately following the election results. The violence took place mainly in Port-Gentil, where the main market and some French-owned buildings were set on fire. Despite claims of electoral fraud, the post-election fervor has largely subsided.

Like most Gabonese leaders, Ali Ben is a member of the educated, politically connected urban elite. He was educated abroad at the Sorbonne in Paris. Ali Ben outwardly professes support for democratic policies in Gabon and promised during his campaign to bring more transparency and democracy to Gabon. However, given the limited resources at his disposal and the financial constraints of re-consolidating alliances, Ali Ben will not likely have the funds to follow through on all of his campaign promises.

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## **SOCIAL/POLITICAL ORGANIZATION**

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### **Local Social Organization**

#### ***House and Village Organization***

Since ancient times, the smallest social group in Gabon has been known as a House. Houses are extended families or a collection of related families forming a clan, led by a Big Man or chief. Villages, the next largest social unit, comprise numerous Houses that settled together. Villages are semi-permanent organizations, informally led by the House leader who founded the village. The village leader has no formal means of asserting his authority and has to consult with other chiefs. Village membership has changed over time as Houses left a village or broke off to form a new village. Houses have moved to improve access to trade routes and fertile land or to escape conflict between Houses. In the past, Houses generally relocated every 10 to 15 years. The power and influence

of a House was based on the people within it, not the land it occupied. Because Houses relocated, longstanding claims to land were not passed down through generations. Instead, control over people determined a House's wealth.

### ***Social Organization***

*Ekomi-Nguema is a young man who works as a mechanic in a petroleum refinery in Port-Gentil. He misses his family and wishes he could visit them more often but has settled into urban life. He has friends from different regions and ethnic groups who all came to Port-Gentil for work. Ekomi even has some foreign friends, such as Abdoulaye Faye, a Senegalese taxi driver. Ekomi is happy that Abdoulaye has a steady job, though he has no desire to be a taxi driver himself because it is not a respectable occupation for Gabonese. However, Ekomi does worry that the foreign workers take away better paying jobs from skilled Gabonese workers. He often blames the high Gabonese unemployment rate on the presence of foreigners in Port-Gentil and Libreville. Despite his new friendships, Ekomi knows that ultimately he owes his new life to old clan affiliations; a clan member who has been established in Port-Gentil for many years helped him find employment.*

*Ekomi did not participate in the riots following the presidential election in August 2009, but he sympathizes with those who protested, most of whom are Fang like himself. Ekomi feels that President Omar Bongo was in power for too long and that it was time for a change in leadership. He believes Gabon is in danger of becoming a kingdom ruled by the Bongo family rather than a true democracy. Ekomi also believes that electoral fraud contributed to Ali Ben Bongo's victory; however, he respects the court's decision to name Ali Ben president. Ekomi would like to become more politically involved but believes that the average citizen cannot influence the government through peaceful, democratic means. Instead, he listens to rap music that expresses frustrations at the life and government of Gabon. He enjoys the urban music scene and would like to join a rap group once he improves his singing.*

Although Houses, clans, and villages of origin remain important for family identities today, urbanization has decreased their influence in Gabonese society. Individuals living and working in cities usually maintain contact with family members in rural areas, returning for regular visits. In addition, government policies have led many Houses to settle permanently in their villages.

### ***Clan Organization***

In Gabon, clans comprise extended families encompassing many Houses and villages. In 19<sup>th</sup> century Gabon, clans evolved out of a practical necessity to maintain ties between family members who no longer lived in the same village, to forge alliances, and to secure trading rights. Marriages were used to join two clans vying for the same trade route or to form an alliance against a third rival clan. Clan membership had social and political benefits; an individual's social status and ability to obtain certain types of work often depended on clan membership. Some clans, predominantly those in the north, trace their lineage through the male line. Other clans, predominantly those in the south, trace their lineage through the female line. Since clans are formed from extended families, clan membership overlaps with ethnic identity. Many clans are associated with origin stories, food taboos, or a belief in a founding ancestor.

Although an important identifier, clan membership can be quite flexible. Even today, some Gabonese form “fictive kinship” arrangements to gain access to land, money, or other resources. In addition, non-relatives, known as *benyi*, can join a clan by offering a payment (*pahu*) to the clan leader, although they have limited rights compared to the true clan members. While most clans claim descent from a common ancestor, in reality few, if any, have such

straightforward and consistent membership. Nevertheless, the idea of a permanent clan structure is significant to the Gabonese.

Although clan membership and kinship ties remain important in Gabon, rapid urbanization has diminished the strength of these ties. As more Gabonese relocate to urban areas, clan affiliation becomes difficult to maintain. However, clan membership continues to be more important than ethnic identity in forging connections.

## ***Gender Roles***

In general, roles and duties within the immediate family are determined by age, gender, and status. In villages, male duties include clearing land, building and maintaining homes, and hunting. Men will not perform labor that they consider to be within the domain of women. Female duties include planting, tending, and transporting crops; food preparation; cleaning; and raising children. In many rural areas, parenting responsibilities are shared across households, and children refer to any woman of childbearing age as “mother.” A woman lives with her husband and farms her husband’s fields, even in clans where lineage is traced through the female line. In urban areas, women increasingly serve as the head of household and take sole care of their children. Women often do very well in the urban wage economy and oftentimes become economically independent.



**Women Washing Clothes**

Gabon, for the most part, is a patriarchal society. However, several notable women have achieved high status and influence in Gabon. Rose Francine Rogombe served as interim president following Omar Bongo's death and is the current president of the senate. The late President Bongo often relied on his connections with various women's organizations within the PDG for support. The current president, Ali Ben Bongo, appointed Angelique Ngoma, formally the minister for families, as the first female minister of defense.

## **Marriage**

Marriages are generally determined by the male members of the family. Although illegal as of 1963, bride-price payments, in which the family of the groom gives a sum of money or goods to the bride's family, still accompany most marriages. This payment represents the value of the woman and is intended to compensate her family for the loss of her labor. *Fang* women command the highest bride-price payments, an indication of the high social status of the *Fang*. Inability to pay this high bride price has led some poorer *Fang* men to marry women from *Pygmy* ethnic groups, which will accept a lower bride price. Once married, the *Pygmy* woman lives with her *Fang* husband, speaks *Fang*, and raises her children as *Fang*. The children remain a part of their father's lineage. In the past, Gabonese in rural areas commonly had polygamous marriages. Today, although the practice is less common, many men have multiple wives. In urban areas, men may have multiple partners whom they do not marry and do not fully provide for. This forces many urban women to provide for themselves and their families.

## **Government**

Gabon is a multi-party democracy headed by a president and a national assembly. In addition to the prime minister, the num-



ber of government ministers varies between 20 and 30. The local government in Gabon is modeled after the French system; during the colonial period, the French colonial government established districts, which are now part of Gabon's civil administration. Local officials are both elected (mayors, municipal

### ***Gabonese Identity and Affiliation***

*Jeannette is a Baka (Pygmy) woman who was born and raised in the rural bush of the Woleu N'Tem region. She is in her late teens and recently married a Fang man named Bilogo-Ndong. Jeannette has a Pygmy name, but Bilogo prefers that she use her French name.*

*After a long day in the fields planting crops, Jeannette walks back to the village. Although she is pregnant, she, like all women in Gabon, is expected to work. As Jeannette walks, she thinks about the opportunities that will be available to her child in contemporary Gabon. She is pleased to have married a Fang man, even though Bilogo married her only because he could not afford the bride price for a Fang woman. Jeannette is pleased that her children will be accepted as Fang, even though their mother is a Pygmy. They will learn to speak Fang and will have access to greater opportunities and education. Jeannette is both hopeful and concerned that when her children come of age they will move to Libreville or another urban area. Jeannette would like for them to obtain good jobs in the civil service and be successful. However, she worries about the crime in cities and is saddened at the thought of seeing her grown children at most once a year. She hopes that at least one of her children will stay in the village and perhaps learn some Pygmy traditions. While Jeannette is glad to have her children raised as Fang, she worries that the Pygmy traditions are dying out. It saddens her to think that the healing knowledge of her people may be lost to future generations.*

*Once Jeannette reaches home, she puts aside these thoughts and concentrates on household tasks such as cleaning and preparing dinner for Bilogo.*

councils, etc.) and appointed (government ministers, provincial governors, etc.).

The Gabonese strongly associate politics and political power with religious beliefs. Many Gabonese believe that good leadership depends on the ability to wield supernatural powers and see into the future. Most political leaders join secret societies to project an image of a spiritually powerful leader. The late President Bongo, for example, held high-ranking positions within multiple secret societies. His position as a respected leader of these societies increased his power, influence, and prestige in the political realm.

### ***The President in Government and Society***

The president is the head of the government and exercises a disproportionate amount of control relative to the other parts of the government. This was particularly true during the presidency of Omar Bongo, who ruled Gabon for more than 40 years (1967–2009). He personally oversaw nearly every aspect of governance and ran what amounted to an autocracy.

President Bongo maintained political stability by limiting the power of competing political parties. One of Bongo's earliest acts as president was to abolish all political parties except his own Gabonese Democratic Party (PDG). In response to mounting political pressures and the outbreak of riots protesting Bongo's authoritarian rule in early 1990, a national conference was held during which President Bongo accepted a multi-party political system. In the first multi-party parliamentary elections, held in September 1990, the PDG maintained a narrow majority, winning 62 seats and losing 57 seats to opposing candidates. Although Bongo and the PDG remained in power, following the parliamentary elections the Gabonese felt a sense of liberation and democratization.

Many Gabonese felt freer to criticize Bongo and the policies of his regime, although tensions remained. In 1992, anger toward the regime exploded into violent clashes between crowds and parties opposed to the regime. After repressing these outbreaks, Bongo and the PDG tightened their control over the country and limited the role of opposition parties.

Clan membership, ethnic ties, and informal social networks are important sources of support for national leaders. The late President Bongo surrounded himself with his relatives and immediate family members in key political, security, and intelligence positions. For example, Bongo's son, Ali Ben Bongo Ondimba, the current president of Gabon, was the minister of defense under his father. Bongo's daughter, Pascaline Bongo, was the director of the office of the president. As a member of the minority *Téké* ethnic group, Bongo built a network of ethnic alliances to counter the majority *Fang* and maintain the presidency. Most positions within the office of the president and the ministries are given to relatives and clan members, a practice many *Fang* view as nepotism. However, should the *Fang* come into power at any point, its leaders would likely implement many of the same clan-based practices.

Bongo did not rely only on his family and clan for support. He reached out to other groups, such as the *Mpongwé* (a sub-group of the *Myéné*-speaking group), who resented *Fang* dominance in their home *Estuary* region and were eager to form alliances with Bongo to keep the *Fang* out of power and attempt to regain some degree of power and influence. In addition, Omar Bongo was deft at using economic resources to ensure loyalty and cooperation, creating widespread, patron-client relationships. Like his father, Ali Ben Bongo will likely surround himself with trusted family members and build ethnic alliances and patron-client relationships.

## ***Public Society and the Government***

Today, the Gabonese believe there are few legitimate ways to influence the government, bring about social or political change, or make their voices heard. Accusations of corruption and election fraud have accompanied Bongo's election victories as well as the election of his son Ali Ben Bongo. Despite these concerns, the Bongos continue to rule Gabon. This has contributed to the outbreak of riots, particularly in Port-Gentil, because rioting is seen as the only means of voicing discontent. At the same time, the civil service is one of the few lucrative job markets for educated Gabonese. The desire of most Gabonese to work for the civil service limits outspoken opposition within a citizenry that simultaneously resents and depends on the government.

## **Educational Institutions**

Gabon's 80-percent literacy rate is one of the highest in Central Africa, and more than 90 percent of the population has received some primary education. The Gabonese educational system is based on the French system; after primary school, Gabonese attend seven years of secondary-level classes, after which students receive their baccalaureate and are eligible to pursue studies at a university. Despite the large number of Gabonese who complete their primary education, few go on to complete their baccalaureate and attend a university. Students who do attend a university are usually from affluent families. While most students attend university in Gabon, some elite students are able to attend university in France.

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## **CULTURAL ECONOMY AND LIFESTYLE**

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Gabon is relatively politically stable, rich in natural resources, and economically prosperous. The country's per capita income is four

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### **Children Walking to School**

times greater than the regional average. However, this stability and prosperity benefits only the wealthiest 2 percent of the population. Most Gabonese live in poverty and have a relatively low life expectancy of 60 years. The most significant contrast in the economy and lifestyle in Gabon is between rural and urban areas.

## **Rural Areas**

### ***Cultural Economy***

Rural Gabonese live in agriculture-based communities and survive through a mix of farming and trading. Historically, Gabonese villagers relocated on average every 10 years. During the colonial era, French policies led to communities grouped into larger and more permanent villages, an arrangement the government still pursues. Rural Gabonese do move between farms, villages, and cities for work, but generally they return to their home village. Ru-

ral Gabonese may have a secondary house closer to their fields in addition to a house in the village. Farming is done using shifting cultivation techniques that enable farmers to maximize the productivity of the poor-quality soil. Staple crops are manioc (cassava), plantains, African yams, taro, peanuts, and sweet potatoes.

Hunting is an important source of food and livelihood for rural Gabonese. Wildlife, known locally as “bush meat,” is a cheap and convenient source of protein. Bush meat is also an important source of income for hunters who sell the meat in local markets. Hunters use snares or nets to capture small animals, twelve-gauge shotguns and cable snares to kill a variety of mammals and birds, and 458-bolt action rifles to hunt elephants, though elephant hunting is illegal. Hunting is typically localized around the village; however, rural Gabonese may travel farther to pursue bigger game. During its recent expansion, the logging industry has created new roads that provide access to densely forested areas previously inaccessible to hunters. Conversely, the creation of national reserves where wildlife is protected has limited the ability of rural Gabonese to survive through hunting.

### ***Lifestyles and Dwellings***

Lifestyles in rural areas remain fairly traditional. Villages are close to main roads,



**Local Industry (Photo by Alfredo Urdaci)**

whereas *Pygmy* communities and settlements are set farther back, close to or within the forest. Dwindling numbers of Gabonese live in rural areas, and those who have not relocated to major urban areas reside in small towns alongside major roads.

## **Urban Areas**

Most Gabonese (75–80 percent) reside in urban areas. In the past 60 years, Gabon's urban population has increased significantly, while the rural population has fallen by half. Libreville, Gabon's capital, has grown dramatically. Mass urbanization is due in part to colonial policies and the industrialization of the economy. In urban areas, the Gabonese have access to more stable employment and greater educational opportunities. French influence has also been stronger in urban areas, where French foods and restaurants can be found, although these are too expensive for the average Gabonese. Urban Gabonese maintain ties to their rural villages, making regular trips back to the home villages in rural areas, usually in August and September. Likewise, residents of rural areas try to visit small towns whenever possible. In times of crisis, conflict, or political instability, such as during the 1964 coup, Gabonese may flee from urban areas to their rural relatives for refuge. Women and children in particular are considered safer in the village than in an urban area during a crisis. However, during more recent crises, such as the short-lived riots of the 1990s, most Gabonese remained in their urban homes rather than fleeing to rural areas.

## ***National Cultural Economy***

Gabon's national economy is based on exporting goods, particularly oil, and is rigidly controlled by the government. The four main exports are petroleum (oil), timber, manganese, and uranium. The reliance on exports has caused dramatic shifts in population

distribution. The pre-colonial and colonial era economy thrived on agricultural practices that required populations to be spread across rural farms, whereas the post-colonial export economy requires an urban workforce. This has resulted in a migration of people to urban areas, concentrating the population in three major cities. The economy relies on the export of raw materials, and consequently, Gabon has never developed a potentially profitable manufacturing industry. Exporting raw materials keeps Gabon economically dependent on its trade partners. Gabon's agricultural sector suffers from a lack of investment, and as a result, the country now relies heavily on imported food.

## **Petroleum and Minerals**

Petroleum and minerals are the most valuable natural resources in Gabon. President Omar Bongo redefined Gabon as a major oil-producing state by joining OPEC in 1973. The OPEC pricing policy ushered Gabon into an era of prosperity. Oil production began in the 1960s, revenues peaked in the late 1990s, and production is now declining. Today, revenue from petroleum exports accounts for 40 percent of Gabon's GDP and 60 percent of the national budget. While Gabon still exports oil, many experts estimate that the oil reserves may be depleted within the next decade. It is unclear how much of the petroleum profits are reinvested in the industry and how much are simply added to the private fortune of the Bongo family. Most of the remaining petroleum deposits are along the coast in the Gulf of Guinea, and recent increases in offshore drilling have caused tensions with Gabon's neighbors.

In addition to petroleum, Gabon has deposits of minerals such as diamonds, gold, phosphate, niobium, manganese, and uranium. Minerals mined from Gabon can produce a highly pure form of manganese dioxide. During the 1960s, manganese and





**Oil Rig off the Coast of Port-Gentil (Photo by Nicola Zingarelli)**

uranium exports increased, but by the 1990s, mineral production had slowed. In the early 2000s, new demands for supplies of iron and steel brought renewed investments in Gabonese manganese. In recent years, Chinese businesses have begun investing in the mineral wealth of Gabon. The Chinese firm *Belinga* has opened mines and is building a large railway to connect the mines with the Trans-Gabonese Railway. In addition, new efforts to extract phosphates and niobium are under way.

## **Timber**

Timber has been an important Gabonese natural resource and a source of national income for many years, but it receded sharply behind petroleum in the 1970s. Recently, declining oil reserves

have restored timber's economic importance as a key export commodity. The timber industry is the biggest employer in Gabon, and many men work as laborers at logging sites. The decline in petroleum supply has increased the pressure on the timber industry to provide additional revenue. Timber industry growth has significantly impacted hunting and wildlife. Infrastructure associated with the timber industry, such as access roads, has provided hunters entrance into previously inaccessible regions of forest, resulting in dramatic declines in animal populations around timber camps and roads. Today, Chinese and Malaysian firms are becoming increasingly active in the Gabonese timber industry and are overshadowing the few remaining French timber companies.

## **Eco-Tourism and Nature Conservation Reserves**

The Gabonese government is creating national parks and conservation zones in an attempt to combat environmental degradation caused by the timber industry. Gabon joined Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad, the Republic of the Congo, and Equatorial Guinea in signing the Yaounde Declaration in 1999 to implement sustainable forest management. Gabon is now home to 13 national parks that cover more than 10 percent of the country. These national parks are home to a variety of wildlife, including 40 percent of the world's gorillas and a large population of forest elephants. However, efforts to develop an eco-tourism industry based on these national parks have not been successful.

## ***Urban Cultural Economy***

The cultural economy in urban areas differs significantly from that of rural areas. Urban sprawl has consumed much of the farmland surrounding urban centers. As a result, agriculture is not viable in urban centers.



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### Sitatunga

The government civil service provides one of the few means of employment for urban residents, particularly in Libreville. Wealthy Gabonese in urban areas generally have salaried employment, usually in a government office. Middle-class Gabonese also hold steady jobs in the public sector. However, they may need to earn additional income through part-time work as teachers, consultants, or petty traders. Lower income Gabonese may be able to find work only as handymen, laborers, petty street traders, or shop assistants. Young women often work as prostitutes in Libreville, soliciting expatriates and rich Gabonese. They are nicknamed *Tuées-Tuées* (Killed-Killed), referencing their vulnerability to diseases as well as their role in “hunting” male clients.

Foreigners and expatriate populations dominate many sectors of the urban economy. Most private businesses are run by expatri-

ates, who may hire Gabonese workers at low salaries. Many foreign nationals earn a middle-class living in Gabon as merchants or small-business owners. As small businesses and retail stores are predominantly run by foreign nationals, native Gabonese are generally shut out of this economic sector. Small-scale markets and trade businesses are often run by West Africans who usually employ their own family members.

### ***Lifestyles and Dwellings***

The Gabonese capital of Libreville has long been the destination of choice for Gabonese seeking stable work and better opportunities. Historically, Libreville was a center for education and professional training. During the colonial era, Libreville residents were better prepared for careers in the colonial bureaucracy and private employment than many other educated West Africans and earned a reputation across West Africa as excellent professionals. Today,



**Libreville Market**

the government civil service is one of the few sources of meaningful and stable employment for educated Gabonese. To secure this type of employment, Gabonese must be connected to relatives who have some leverage in the ruling party, the government, or the administration.

Today, Libreville is a study in contrasts; modern skyscrapers exist alongside dilapidated shacks interspersed with vendors earning their living by selling cheap trinkets. The cost

of living in Libreville is extremely high for elites as well as the urban poor. This is due in part to the lack of Gabonese-grown food products found in the city. Gabon relies heavily on imported foodstuffs. Even fruits and vegetables are imported from foreign countries, notably Cameroon and Europe. Importing basic necessities drives up the cost of living. Libreville has an active nightlife with bars and clubs where music plays well into the early hours of the morning. Cheap taxicabs and a bus system provide transportation throughout the city. Expensive French restaurants can be found throughout Libreville and within many of the major hotels. In recent years, American-style pizza has become popular, and pizza shops have sprouted up across the city. There are also supermarkets where affluent Gabonese can purchase imported food, including a supermarket, known locally as the “American Store,” that sells American-style food products.



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**Downtown Libreville**

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Port-Gentil is the seat of the petroleum industry and has a more industrial feel than Libreville. Since it is on a peninsula with no roads connecting it to the capital, most travel in and out of Port-Gentil requires transportation via airplanes or ships. Although French companies dominate the economy in Port-Gentil, the large numbers of American and European workers in the area somewhat mask the French presence. Port-Gentil's residents tend to be more politically active and willing to publicly protest the Bongo regime; it was the site of the biggest riots following the recent election of Ali Ben Bongo in 2009. Franceville is the third major urban area and the center of Gabon's mining industry.

### **The Impact of Urbanization**

Urbanization refers to populations moving from rural to urban areas in search of opportunities such as jobs and education. In the



**Port-Gentil Airport**

past 60 years, Gabon's urban population has grown significantly. As a result of rapid urbanization:

- A national Gabonese identity is forming as the shared experiences of living, working, and socializing in an urban environment are proving more relevant than ethnic origin.
- Gabonese youth have been deeply affected by urbanization. Urban youth are increasingly embracing *une culture métissée* (a mixed culture), which encompasses Westernized ideas in place of traditional, rural/village life. They sometimes view traditional lifestyles as being ill-suited to their vision of modern Gabonese society.
- Unemployment and crime rates are very high, despite the increase in employment opportunities.
- Urban sprawl has overtaken outlying areas, reducing the amount of farmable land near cities and resulting in food shortages. Housing costs have increased, and shanty towns with poor sanitation have formed on the outskirts of cities.

## Popular Culture in Contemporary Gabon

Gabon's popular culture combines African, French, and global influences. French and African music are popular, as is Western soul music. French cultural influences are more noticeable among the more affluent Gabonese. Foreign popular culture has not penetrated rural villages to the extent that it has in urban areas.

Gabon has a well-established film industry. The late President Omar Bongo founded the *Centre National du Cinema* and personally financed the production of select films, enabling him to directly influence their content. Today, most Gabonese films are produced in French instead of in local Gabonese languages. Gabon has a lively music scene and is well known for its many rap

groups. Rap groups help create local community ties by expressing the shared frustrations of urban communities.

### ***The Impact of Rap Music***

Gabonese rap artists are mostly young men, generally in their early teens to mid-twenties, from lower or middle-class communities in urban areas. Membership in a rap group is an important source of group identity for Gabonese youth because:

- Rap groups create local community ties by expressing the shared frustrations of urban communities, including that of urban poverty, and the shared experiences as contemporary African youths.
- Rap glorifies the ideals of “getting out” and “getting ahead.” Many Gabonese rap artists hope to “make it big” and use their rap careers to escape urban poverty in Gabon.
- Gabonese rap groups exemplify the multi-lingual atmosphere of Libreville; French, English, and local languages are often used within the same song. Many Gabonese rappers deliberately use only French or English lyrics in an effort to appeal to a broader audience and build an international reputation and career. Other groups use a mix of languages, deliberately emphasizing local languages.
- Rap music may be a good avenue for making friends and building camaraderie within the urban, male youth population. The Gabonese are proud of their musical traditions and contributions to this musical genre, and they may want to speak with Americans about rap music in the United States.

### **Media and Telecommunications**

The Gabonese media is heavily influenced, both directly and indirectly, by the government. Besides a few oppositional newspapers



in Libreville (*Misamu* and *Le Nganga*), Gabon has no truly independent media outlets. Political parties or the government fund the major press outlets. Press outlets not directly funded by a political party are funded by members of the wealthy upper class who need to maintain their ties to the Bongo family and thus practice self-censorship. As a result, political agendas limit and distort Gabonese news. The public does have access to additional news sources through international newspapers and magazines; however, these resources can only be purchased in town. In addition, rumors and gossip play a significant role in connecting observers of local politics and expressing critique and opposition to the regime. These rumors are called *kongossa* in Gabon.

The only form of government-sanctioned criticism available is the daily opinion column written by the fictitious “Makaya” in the newspaper *L’Union*. Makaya claims to be employed by members of the government as a driver, thus privy to information and gossip. Makaya’s columns repeat political rumors and criticize members of the government. However, Makaya seldom criticizes the president directly; the president is usually held up as the one good member of the government, whose noble efforts are undermined by corrupt politicians. The public is aware of the politically slanted nature of the news media in Gabon. Some Gabonese have simply given up on obtaining substantive news and prefer to hear about entertainment and celebrity news.

## ***Newspapers***

Today, some of the most popular newspapers in Gabon are from Europe, and 75 percent of the newspapers in circulation in Gabon are foreign. *Le Monde*, a French newspaper, is popular. However, most of these papers are read only by the small number of upper-class Gabonese. Even foreign papers are not immune to govern-

ment influence; critics have accused Bongo of paying foreign papers to publish positive and complimentary stories about Gabon. *L'Union*, the only daily Gabonese newspaper, has very strong ties to the government. English-language newspapers may be difficult to find in Gabon, though some newsstands sell *The International Herald-Tribune*. In addition, CNN is available via cable.

## **Radio**

The radio is an important source of information and entertainment across Africa. Radios are popular in Gabon in part because the print media is distrusted. Radio news tends to focus on items left out of the print media, and thus it has gained a reputation for presenting more truthful information, particularly about topics unpopular with the regime. News radio also tends to focus on political scandals and is well known for criticizing politicians and governments. Gabon is home to the only pan-African radio station, Africa No. 1, which is based in Libreville. The station is owned and run by French and Gabonese investors. Gabonese also tune in to international radio news shows, for example the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and Radio France Inter (RFI) news shows, which they believe offer more accurate reporting.

## **Telecommunications**

Increasing access to telecommunications technologies is a significant trend throughout Gabon, particularly within the capital. Gabon has only 40,000 fixed telephone lines in Gabon but more than 350,000 mobile phone subscribers. Gabon has 25,000 working computers, some of which are housed in its 210 Internet cafes, and an estimated 55,000 Gabonese use the Internet. However, Internet access is extremely limited in rural areas and even in provincial capitals. Nevertheless, many wealthy, urban Gabonese depend on

Internet websites for their news. Two popular French-language news sites are Gabonnews.ga and Gaboneco.com.

## Health Issues

The Gabonese population is vulnerable to a variety of diseases, including malaria and waterborne pathogens. HIV and AIDS infection rates in Central Africa are high, and Gabon is no exception. Other common ailments found in Gabon are Hepatitis A, bacterial diarrhea, and typhoid fever. In addition, between 1994 and 2001, a number of Ebola outbreaks occurred in Gabon's gold mining camps and rural villages. The low birth rate and high infant mortality rate in Gabon are key health concerns. The infant mortality rate, thought to be the result of poor pre-natal care and poor health care in rural areas, is roughly 150 deaths per 1000 births. Sterility among Gabonese men is thought to be the cause of the low birth rate. The cause of widespread sterility is unknown. Life expectancy in Gabon is 42 years for men and 57 years for women.

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## CUSTOMS AND PRACTICES

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### Greetings and Conversations

Most Gabonese speak French and will expect foreigners to converse in French. Gabonese, particularly those in rural areas, also speak local languages.

Typical greetings are in French. Some examples are *bonjour* (hello) and *ca va?* (How are you?). In western Gabon, people often greet each other by saying *mbolo* (hello). The Gabonese appreciate it when visitors use basic French greetings. Some Gabonese use local languages in greetings; this indicates that they may be from the same region.

## Appearance and Ethnic Group/Social Class

Clothing or other aspects of a person's appearance do not indicate what ethnic group the person is from. There are no major differences in clothing styles among ethnic groups. Also, most of the ethnic groups in Gabon share physical characteristics. *Pygmies* also look similar to other groups, though they are sometimes of smaller stature. *Pygmies* will likely not be present in urban areas.

However, clothing or other aspects of appearance can indicate what social class a person is from. Affluent citizens and members of the government will most likely dress in expensive suits or finely tailored dresses made from African-style material. Middle-class Gabonese often dress in Western-style clothing such as blue jeans and T-shirts. Clothing made from brightly patterned African cloth is also very popular and may be worn by people of all social classes, but mostly by women.

## Hospitality and Dining

The Gabonese show their generosity to guests by serving large portions of their best meals. Prestigious guests are offered multiple dishes to choose among. In addition, the amount of protein (e.g., meat or fish) that a Gabonese family is able to serve indicates wealth and prestige. When hosting prestigious guests, the Gabonese will serve as much meat and fish as they can. Often, this means they will serve far more meat and fish than they would be able or willing to serve at a regular family meal. Some of the protein might be local "bush meat," such as forest antelope, monkeys, porcupines, and forest pigs. Staple foods that the Gabonese serve include cassava loaves, plantains, white rice, soup (typically includes a sauce and a meat, for example meat in a tomato sauce or peanut sauce with vegetables), and manioc leaves and smoked fish.

When the Gabonese invite guests to dine in their home, it is the host's duty to provide for the guests and show off his or her generosity. Therefore, guests do not need to bring a gift. However, many Gabonese are aware of the Western custom of bringing a small gift and would kindly accept any token offered. However, guests invited to attend a village ceremony will be expected to participate in the ceremony, and this may include offering gifts. Also, the Gabonese will consider it rude if guests do not reciprocate by inviting their host to dine with them at a later date.

When not eating at home, Gabonese men frequent the many local *cafets* and restaurants throughout Libreville that serve cheap Gabonese food. Most Westerners do not go to *cafets*, despite the bargain prices. Libreville has restaurants that cater to European expatriate populations and serve Western-style food. French cuisine is popular and available throughout Libreville. In recent years, pizza has become popular, and there are now restaurants that serve pizza. Grilled fish is another popular dish. Bars serving freshly grilled fish and beer can easily be found throughout the city. Many African women also sell inexpensive African meals or grilled meat and fish. Gabonese generally cannot afford to shop in the supermarkets and instead get their food from local markets or small West African or Syrio-Lebanese shops selling canned goods on street corners.

Some American food can be purchased in Gabon. There is a supermarket that sells a selection of American food products such as ketchup and macaroni and cheese. Since these products are imported, prices will be inflated.

## **Gabonese Celebrations**

Many Gabonese participate in *Bwiti* rituals. *Bwiti* temples are found in urban and rural areas. Ceremonies can last several days,



**Bwiti Dancers (Photo by Xavier Bourgois)**

usually culminating in a large celebration. Saturday nights are a popular time for rituals and initiations. During these celebrations, crowds will gather within the *Bwiti* temples. In most cases, the crowds will be contained within the temple. These are festive and celebratory occasions and are not associated with violence. Members of *Bwiti* chapels are initiates, thus the uninitiated are not likely to be invited.

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## **CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS**

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Gabon's security forces include the army, navy, air force, gendarmerie, national police, and Republican Guard (organized as the Presidential Guard from 1960 to 1995), which is the most powerful force and provides security for the president. The primary duty of the security forces is to maintain internal security. The civilian population views each of these forces differently based on its roles

and responsibilities, and views visitors differently based on their association with these forces.

## Security Forces: Demographics and Organization

The late President Omar Bongo ran the military. Bongo manipulated the ethnic composition of the military and exacerbated ethnic tensions to maintain his authority over the security forces. The army is composed mainly of the *Fang* ethnic group. Bongo, as a member of the minority *Téké* ethnic group, distrusted the *Fang*-dominated military. He recruited members of his own ethnic group to the Presidential Guard (at various times known as the Republican Guard) and supplied them with better equipment. Today, the Republican Guard, although small in number, is generally reputed to surpass the army in capabilities. President Bongo also personally selected members of the paramilitary forces based on their ethnic or regional origins. Thus, while the army is dominated by *Fang*, most of the national security forces have ethnic and regional ties to Bongo.

### Gabonese Security Forces

Force	Roll	Interaction with Civilians
Army/Navy/Air Force	Internal stability	The military usually remains in the barracks and is deployed in times of civil unrest to restore peace.
Republican Guard	Protect the president	The Republican Guard is viewed as the most powerful and sophisticated of the security forces. It is primarily tasked with protecting the president and as a result is associated with regime stability. It rarely interacts with the public.
Gendarmerie	National security and surveillance	The gendarmerie, along with the police, often mans checkpoints or roadblocks along main roads. These road blocks are often used to extort bribery payments from travelers.

<b>Force</b>	<b>Roll</b>	<b>Interaction with Civilians</b>
National Police	Police duties, internal stability, respond civil unrest, maintain law and order, involvement in criminal cases, and surveillance	Police are widely considered to be corrupt. The police, along with the gendarmerie, often man checkpoints or roadblocks along main roads. These road blocks are often used to extort bribery payments from travelers.
Mobile Security Units	Respond to urban protests and outbreaks of violence and deal with illegal immigration	No information available

Bongo further solidified his control over the national security forces by strategically placing key individuals, often family members, in positions of authority. For example, his nephew Idriss Ngari and his son Ali Ben Bongo both served as minister of defense, and his brother-in-law once ran the national police. Highly paid expatriates from the *Provence* region of France held important positions throughout the security forces. These expatriates, often referred to as Bongo’s “Corsican Mafia,” reported to and were accountable only to Bongo. Some of these expatriates also served in Bongo’s Presidential Guard. These individuals strongly supported the regime and had a reputation for using harsh tactics to maintain the stability of the regime and the country. These units will likely remain loyal to current President Ali Ben Bongo.

In addition to presidential leadership of the military, traditional forms of organization and social ties are important within the Gabonese military. The military is considered a legitimate career path for Gabonese and often functions as a patronage system, providing access to advancement and wealth. Likewise, civilians often interact with the military through informal, family-based networks. For example, when making a complaint about a particular



military unit, civilians report the complaint directly to a family member in the military.

## Relationship with the French Military

The long history of interaction with France and the French military continues to influence Gabonese military and civilian attitudes toward the military. Gabon signed a mutual defense treaty with France in August 1974 and again in 1985. France maintains an active group of advisers embedded within the Gabonese military. French advisers and French military detachments join the Gabonese military on all significant training maneuvers.

The most significant involvement of the French military is the French military base (*Camp de Gaulle*) near the airport in Libreville. France often uses this military base as a staging ground for regional operations. The ability to rapidly deploy troops from Gabon throughout the region is a key advantage for the French. The French military has also become involved in domestic civil unrest within Gabon. For instance, on multiple occasions the French military has



**Military Hospital in Libreville**

deployed to Port-Gentil to put down riots. In 1964, the French military moved to overturn the coup orchestrated by the Gabonese military, demonstrating its resolve to protect French interests in Gabon.

## **Interaction with Gabonese Civilians**

The Gabonese have a relatively neutral opinion of the national security forces. For the most part, the army is kept within the barracks and emerges only in times of civil unrest. The police forces and the gendarmerie have the most interaction with civilians, usually at roadblocks and police checkpoints along main roads. The police and gendarmerie often use roadblocks as a means of extracting bribery payments from the population, particularly targeting West Africans. Drivers, both Gabonese and American, should carry appropriate identification at all times. On the whole, Gabonese civilians consider this level of corruption an acceptable annoyance.

Security forces also interact with civilians during riots, which tend to occur in conjunction with political protests. Political protests, such as those that sparked the riots in the early 1990s, are often led by unemployed youths who may not respect the national police or military. When police forces are brought in to disperse the protests, the youths may react with hostility and a riot may ensue. Young Gabonese who are angry at the government may view the police forces as the only tangible representative of the government and an easy mark for the expression of their anger. In general, riots are not planned or organized. However, once a riot has broken out, various participants with political agendas may try to influence or direct the riot.

## **Interaction with the United States**

Gabon has had significant involvement with the United States. During the mid-1960s, the French attempted to limit U.S. involve-

ment in Gabon, hinting that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was behind the 1964 coup attempt. However, Bongo reached out to U.S. companies in the 1970s to obtain funding for his Trans-Gabonese railroad.

Today, the U.S. military supports Gabon. Under the auspices of the new Africa Command (AFRICOM), U.S. forces have engaged in joint training missions with the Gabonese military. Most members of Gabon's security forces support the combined training exercises and view them as opportunities to learn from the U.S. military and increase their capabilities.

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## CONCLUSION

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Gabon is a dynamic fusion of African traditions and modern influences. Local traditions are very much alive in both rural and urban areas. Traditional ethnic, clan, and regional affiliations remain the most salient forms of social organization. However, the Gabonese are open to and accepting of global influences. Continued urbanization is giving rise to new forms of social organization. Many Gabonese, particularly the youth, are embracing modern, urban identities. Despite years of political and economic stability, Gabon is facing key challenges, most notably the growing divide between the rich and poor, popular resentment against the Bongo system (*Bongoïsme*), and the transition to new leadership under President Ali Ben Bongo.















