

Culture Summary: Fon

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CREDITS

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CULTURE SUMMARY: Fon

By: Douglas Falen

ETHNONYMS

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The Fon people refer to themselves as Fonnu, or sometimes as Danhomenu meaning a person of Dahomey, the precolonial Fon kingdom of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries.

ORIENTATION

IDENTIFICATION AND LOCATION

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The Fon people became well known in the anthropological literature following the ethnographic research of Melville Herskovits in the 1930s, and Bernard Maupoil's (1943) writing on religion and divination. The Fon are one of the largest ethnic groups in the south of the Republic of Benin, and it was the precolonial Fon kingdom of Dahomey that dominated this region from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. Fon people still inhabit regions of the former kingdom, stretching 200 km north from the Atlantic coast. The geographic boundaries of Fon territory are roughly the Kouffo River to the west, the Oueme River to the east, the hills of Savalou and Dassa to the north, and the Atlantic Ocean in the south. The Fon represent significant portions of the population in the Atlantique and Littoral Departments in the south, but their largest concentrations are in the Zou department, where they comprise 92% of the population (INSAE 2016). South of the Zou department, and especially along the coast near Cotonou, the Fon are interspersed with related ethnic groups, as well as Yoruba speakers from the east and unrelated peoples from the Sahel. The Fon are culturally and linguistically related to the Mahi people to the north, the Ayizo and Hueda people to the south, and the Gun people to the southeast. They have somewhat more distant connections with the Adja to the west and with the Ewe and Gen/Mina peoples of Togo, Ghana, and coastal Benin. The Fon heartland is the town of Abomey, located 100 km from the Atlantic Ocean on a large, gradually sloping plateau, though significant populations also live in the towns of Bohicon, Djidja, Agbangnizoun, Cové, Ouidah, Zogbodomey, and Abomey-Calavi. Abomey's relatively poor, red, ferrous soil has few rivers or streams, though other regions inhabited by the Fon contain rivers, seasonal marshes, and more fertile agricultural lands, dotted with oil palms, small farms, and an occasional large baobab or iroko tree. The climate of Benin's southern region is tropical, with characteristic West African rainy and dry seasons.

DEMOGRAPHY

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The 2013 national census reported that Benin is home to nearly four million Fon people and closely related ethnic groups, representing about 38% of the nation's population. The population density of the Zou Department, where the Fon are the main ethnic group, was 162 inhabitants per square kilometer, with 67% of the population living in rural areas (INSAE 2016).

LINGUISTIC AFFILIATION

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The Fon language, or Fongbe, also known as Danmegbe (language of Dahomey), belongs to the Gbe group of Kwa languages and is closely related to the Maxi, Gun, Ayizo, Xwela, and Tofin languages (Lewis et al. 2014), with some mutual intelligibility among them. It is less closely related to Aja, Ewe, and Gen/Mina, with which it is mutually unintelligible.

HISTORY AND CULTURAL RELATIONS

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Oral history of the Fon and related ethnic groups traces their origins to the town of Tado, on the Mono River in present-day Togo. Herskovits (1967 vol. 1:167-169) records four origin stories, but the dominant one holds that Princess Aligbonon of Tado mated with a leopard and bore a son named Agasu, ancestor the Fon royal dynasty. In the sixteenth century, Agasu's descendants emigrated and founded a new kingdom in Allada, present-day Benin. Though there are questions about its veracity, the dominant myth holds that during the seventeenth century a dispute over the throne led to the emigration of two princes from Allada and the creation of two new kingdoms, one in Hogbonou (later Porto-Novo) and one in Kana (Bay 1998, Brunet and Giethlen 1900:54, David 1998:23, François 1906:30-31, Law 1997, Lombard 1967:72, Mattei 1895:176, Quenum 1999[1936]:14). Those settling in Kana became known as Fon, but remain closely related to the Gun people of Porto-Novo and the Ayizo of Allada. In Kana, the Fon encountered indigenous Yoruba-speaking peoples of the region before founding the kingdom of Dahomey. According to legend, a Fon leader killed the local Gedeve (Yoruba) ruler named Dan and planted a house post through his belly; the word Dahomey is derived from *Dan-xo-m#* (in the belly of Dan) (Bay 1998: 50, Le Herissé 1911:60, 278). In the seventeenth century, the Fon king Hwegbaja built a new palace near Kana and dug a deep protective trench around his home. This trench is called *agbodo*, and the town within became known as Agbo-m#. Abomey became the Fon capital and seat of the royal palace, a compound surrounded by five to ten meter high mud walls containing 7,000–8,000 residents, servants, and royal wives (Edgerton 2000:15). During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, European travelers' accounts of Abomey's royal court mention the lavish décor, wealth and status enjoyed by the King. The royalty went to great lengths to demonstrate its power and to impress visitors and citizens alike through bloody displays of terror, including human sacrifice (Burton 1864, Skertchly 1874, François 1906:86-87, Lombard 1967:85). In Europe, such gory accounts were read with curiosity and horror, fueling the justification for the eventual conquest of Dahomey. Visitors to Abomey also returned to Europe with fantastic tales of Abomey's female soldiers whose ferocity and courage so impressed them that these warriors were likened to the mythical Greek "Amazons."

[Population \(161\)](#)

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In the eighteenth century, Dahomey expanded and took advantage of lucrative trade developing with European powers on the coast, especially after King Agaja defeated the southern kingdoms of Allada, Savi, and finally Ouidah by 1727 (David 1998: 31, Edgerton 2000: 38). Dahomey's most profitable trade was slavery, and there were frequent slave-raiding battles between Abomey and the Nago/Yoruba-speaking peoples to the East and North. These campaigns also brought Yoruba captives into

the court of Dahomey, where they introduced Yoruba deities and other religious traditions to the Fon. Due to military casualties and slave exportation, between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries the population of Fon-related peoples fell from 511,000 to 280,000 (Manning 1982:32, see also Burton 1864:371, Edgerton 2000:39-40).

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Throughout the period of the Atlantic slave trade there were Portuguese, British and French trading posts in Ouidah (Quenum 1999[1936]:7), but by the mid-nineteenth century French interests gained the upper hand, establishing a permanent Catholic mission (Alladaye 2003, Clément 1996), developing the palm oil trade (Hargreaves 1966:17), and creating French protectorates near the coast. By 1890, tensions erupted into a series of skirmishes between French and Dahomean forces, leading to the French conquest of Dahomey in 1892. The French introduced schooling and public health, levied taxes, and used forced labor to build roads and railroads. By the middle of the twentieth century, forced labor was abandoned and the colony was granted elected representation in the French government, leading to its independence on August 1, 1960 (Agboton 1997, Pliya 1992, Ronen 1975). During this period, regionalism pitted northern Muslims against southern elites, while an enduring division also developed in the south between the Fon, Nago (Yoruba), and Gun peoples.

SETTLEMENTS

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[Standard Of Living \(511\)](#)

[Elimination \(514\)](#)

Fon people live mainly in rural agrarian walled family compounds, sometimes with well over a dozen houses and more than fifty residents. In more densely populated areas, nearby compounds may grow together as new homes are built around the periphery. Rural houses are rectangular single-story earthen constructions made from successive layers of mud, with carpentry supporting a roof atop the four walls. Walls may include a layer of cement, which may be whitewashed for protection and aesthetic appeal. By the late twentieth century, nearly all roofs were aluminum, with rare exceptions of rural homes bearing thatched roofs. Sometimes a single long structure is divided into multiple apartments with separate entrances. Compounds typically have cisterns or wells to provide water for the residents. Throughout the twentieth century, urban construction became more common, with brick or concrete buildings, indoor plumbing, and electricity to power lights, fans, and televisions. Wealthy elites, especially in Cotonou, may have multi-story homes with garages, balconies, air conditioning, and landscaped courtyards.

ECONOMY

[Buying And Selling \(432\)](#)

[Internal Trade \(438\)](#)

[Retail Marketing \(443\)](#)

[Research And Development \(654\)](#)

The economy consists of formal and informal sectors. The formal sector involves institutional structures, including banking, shipping, town markets, government-funded projects and subsidies, and the micro-financing initiatives of international development organizations. Educated people aspire to work as bankers, teachers, office workers, or civil servants. A vibrant informal economy is visible in the widespread retail sales of crafts, domestic items, and other services.

SUBSISTENCE

- [Climate \(132\)](#)
- [Soil \(134\)](#)
- [Domesticated Animals \(231\)](#)
- [Poultry Raising \(235\)](#)
- [Tillage \(241\)](#)
- [Vegetable Production \(244\)](#)
- [Textile Agriculture \(248\)](#)
- [Production And Supply \(433\)](#)

Agriculture is the foundation of the local economy, and farmers produce staple crops of corn, peanuts, manioc, beans, and yams for sale in the market. Other crops include palm oil, tomatoes, oranges, mangos, and bananas. Cash cropping for international export focuses on cotton and cashews, but mechanized farming is extremely rare. Benin's soil is relatively poor, and population growth and lower yields lead many to disregard their fields' normal fallow periods. This, along with soil depletion and decreasing rainfall, has put a strain on the agricultural economy. As of the turn of the twenty-first century, Fon people have increasingly renounced the agricultural lifestyle. In light of educational goals, urban business, and decreasing agricultural productivity, many want to escape the backbreaking work of farming for a life of civil service or commerce. To supplement their income and nutrition, many Fon practice small-scale rearing of livestock. Nearly all homes contain chickens, used for eggs or meat, or sold live in the market. Goats are widespread, while pigs are less common.

COMMERCIAL ACTIVITIES

- [Food Service Industries \(265\)](#)
- [Drinking Establishments \(275\)](#)
- [Occupational Specialization \(463\)](#)
- [Labor Supply And Employment \(464\)](#)
- [Labor Organization \(467\)](#)

Some of the common commercial occupations include hairdresser, seamstress, barber and tailor, as well as taxi driver. These professions are learned through costly apprenticeships that may last three years or more. Other people work as porters in the market, agricultural laborers, servers or managers in restaurants and bars, or as clerks in pharmacies or shops. One of the most common commercial activities is trade.

INDUSTRIAL ARTS

- [Cereal Industry \(256\)](#)
- [Other Food Processing Industries \(258\)](#)
- [Lumbering \(313\)](#)
- [Ceramic Technology \(323\)](#)
- [Masonry \(333\)](#)
- [Carpentry \(335\)](#)
- [Labor Organization \(467\)](#)

In rural areas, small towns, and urban centers alike, Fon engage in numerous small-scale productive activities. Foodstuff processing includes palm oil, manioc flour, corn flour, peanut paste, and palm liquor. Other industries include carpentry, masonry, sculpting, electronics repair, and pottery-making. With the exception of foodstuff processing, most of these skills are acquired through apprenticeship, which can last several years and cost the apprentice a great deal of money. Larger industry is still relatively undeveloped, but there are lumber mills and some multinational cottonseed oil plants.

TRADE

- [Internal Trade \(438\)](#)

[External Trade \(439\)](#)
[Mercantile Business \(441\)](#)
[Retail Marketing \(443\)](#)
[Division Of Labor By Gender \(462\)](#)
[Highway Transport \(494\)](#)
[Port Facilities \(504\)](#)
[Standard Of Living \(511\)](#)

Small-scale trade is widespread and dominated by female merchants. In the informal sector people sell candy, cigarettes, fried bean cakes, fermented corn flour, or peanut sticks out of their homes or from house to house. Formal trade exists in the marketplace, where vendors sit at their stalls selling vegetables, fruits, meat, live animals, rice, corn, manioc, bread, sugar, yams, and prepared foods, as well as household utensils, cellphone recharge cards, cloth, pottery, and items for magical use. In urban areas, there are brick-and-mortar shops for the purchase of electronics, ready-made clothes, canned foods, and liquor. Some merchants trade in wholesale items, traveling between towns or even internationally to purchase foodstuffs, cloth, or other products and sell them at a higher price. Large scale trade is found at Cotonou's shipping port, which imports automobiles, motorcycles, toothpaste, frozen fish, wheat flour, electronics, clothing, building materials, liquor, and countless other items shipped throughout Benin and beyond in large trucks owned by transport companies.

DIVISION OF LABOR

[External Migration \(167\)](#)
[Income And Demand \(434\)](#)
[Division Of Labor By Gender \(462\)](#)
[Occupational Specialization \(463\)](#)
[Labor Supply And Employment \(464\)](#)
[Multi Ethnic Community Relations \(629\)](#)

Many people engage in multiple income-generating activities that may include salaried employment, small-scale trade, and household production. In their spare time, civil servants and other employees might sell cloth, medicine, or food out of their homes. Nevertheless, people generally have one primary source of revenue, as in the case of farmers, teachers, nurses, market vendors, barbers/hairdressers, healers, carpenters, masons, taxi drivers, tailors/seamstresses or restaurant/bar owners. In general, men are the main actors in the construction, transport, government, and large-scale business sectors, while women represent the majority of market vendors and small-scale food producers. For agricultural families, men are expected to clear land, while women tend the fields, though, in reality, there is often cooperation between the genders. Non-Fon migrant populations perform work that Fon avoid. For example, bar waitresses are often from Ghana or Togo, cattle herders are Fulani from the north, and ambulatory shoe repairmen are from Ghana.

LAND TENURE

[Arboriculture \(245\)](#)
[Real Property \(423\)](#)
[Buying And Selling \(432\)](#)
[Residence \(591\)](#)
[Family Relationships \(593\)](#)
[Lineages \(613\)](#)

Until the twentieth century, agricultural lands were owned by patrilineal kin groups and held in trust by family elders, and this is still true in many rural areas in the early twenty-first century. Even on communal property, useful trees are often individually owned. Members of a family, regardless of gender, have rights to use communal land for agriculture, or to construct a house. However, if an individual leaves the family home for many years, his or her claim to the land may weaken, as other family members make more regular use of the land. Because married women live patrilocally, they may be partially alienated from their property, though they are entitled to return to their family land after divorce or being widowed. Beginning in the twentieth century, some families, particularly in urban areas, began dividing up lands for private ownership among the family members, paving the way for property sales and commercial development.

KINSHIP

KIN GROUPS AND DESCENT

[Settlement Patterns \(361\)](#)

[Personal Names \(551\)](#)

[Household \(592\)](#)

[Kin Relationships \(602\)](#)

[Rule Of Descent \(611\)](#)

[Lineages \(613\)](#)

[Clans \(614\)](#)

[Bilineal Kin Groups \(617\)](#)

[Community Structure \(621\)](#)

Among the Fon, kinship is theoretically and ideally conceived of as patrilineal, though in practice some aspects of bilateral descent apply. People identify as a member of the patriline and inherit their father's name, but they maintain strong ties to their mother's family, as well as to a wide range of matrilineal kin, which may allow for residence with matrikin as well as some inheritance from mother to child. The smallest unit of patrilineal kin is the *xue*, roughly equating to "family" or "home," that may be composed of a group of closely related individuals living in a cluster of houses, typically forming a compound. The *henu*, or collectivity, is conceived as a large extended family that unites multiple family compounds. The largest kin group in the patriline is the *ako* (clan), that may consist of thousands of people who share a common ancestor and taboos, but who do not necessarily know each other or reside in proximity.

KINSHIP TERMINOLOGY

[Personal Names \(551\)](#)

[Kinship Terminology \(601\)](#)

Children use the terms "mama" and "papa" in addressing their parents, and may do so for any family member of a higher generation, such as aunts and uncles. But the Fon words for mother and father are *non* and *to*, respectively. Teknonymy is widespread, with parents often being called "father/mother of x" by friends and neighbors. For elderly males, people may use the deferential term of *daa*, which is also a formal title for a head of household. The specific term for father's older brother is *atagan*, and for father's younger brother the term is *atavi*. (According to Rassinoux [1987], these two terms are borrowed from the Mina language. He states that in Fon a paternal uncle older than one's father is *daa daxo* and the younger uncle is *daa kpevi*). A maternal uncle is *nyolon*. For elderly female family members, people may refer to them generically as *na*, particularly in Abomey, where this is a term of respect for a princess of the royal family. But technically a maternal aunt older than one's mother is *nagan*, while the younger aunt is *nafi*. A child is *vi*, a daughter being *vi nyonu* and a son being *vi sunnu*. Siblings are *novi* (technically referring to maternal siblings), and a full sibling is sometimes specified by the term *novi toji*. An older brother is called *fofo* and an older sister *dada*; both terms can be extended to cousins and other same-generation kin. Names in general are flexible, and classificatory mothers, fathers, siblings, or children can be referred to by their respective kin names.

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

MARRIAGE

[Status Role And Prestige \(554\)](#)

[Basis Of Marriage \(581\)](#)

[Regulation Of Marriage \(582\)](#)

[Mode Of Marriage \(583\)](#)

[Nuptials \(585\)](#)

[Polygamy \(595\)](#)

[Kinship Regulation Of Sex \(835\)](#)

Marriage does not follow strict rules of endogamy or exogamy, except for the observance of incest taboos for close relations. Most women are married by their early twenties and men by their early thirties. Forced marriage, sister exchange, and cousin marriage decreased during the twentieth century, and have since been all but abandoned in favor of love matches based on the spouses' choice (Falen 2011). People claim that virginity was traditionally expected of a bride, though this is less true today, especially in urban areas. Bride service has become rare, yet bridewealth is still practiced. According to custom, an engagement is announced by the prospective groom presenting a gift of liquor, cloth, and money to his future in-laws, at which time the bride must give her consent. This ceremony is called *yi asi gbe*, and is followed some months later by the full bridewealth payment, or *asigban*, consisting of significant quantities of cloth, liquor, money, salt, tobacco, sugar, and kola nuts for the bride's family. The groom also offers jewelry, money, and cooking utensils to the bride. At the close of these ceremonies the bride moves into her husband's home. Paying bridewealth entitles a husband to claim his children as members of his patrilineal group; traditionally, children of unions without bridewealth belonged to their mother's family. In practice, patrilineal descent is dominant for defining family identity, and by the late twentieth century bridewealth was no longer a prerequisite for a man to claim his progeny. In fact, by the turn of the twenty-first century formal bridewealth had become increasingly expensive and therefore practiced mainly by the wealthy class. More practical couples may choose for a husband to pay for his wife's apprenticeship or to invest in her commerce, rather than paying bridewealth. Many of the wealthy are Christians, who perform a large, formal church wedding in addition to the customary bridewealth ceremony. Among less wealthy couples, pregnancy or the promise of a later bridewealth payment allow for the beginning of cohabitation, and after the birth of the first child, the union becomes a de facto marriage without any ceremony (Falen 2011). About thirty percent of married men are polygynous (INSAE 2003), mainly with two or three wives. Christian ideals of monogamy have entered public debates on polygyny and co-wife jealousy is common, yet the quest for prestige and a large progeny continue to fuel men's desires for multiple wives (Falen 2008). Either husband or wife may initiate divorce, and divorce and remarriage are common. Divorcées generally fetch a smaller bridewealth when they remarry. If the marriage was recent or childless, the ex-husband's family may demand repayment of the bridewealth after divorce. If the marriage produced children, they are expected to live with their mother until the age of seven, after which they may join their father's home (though there is variability on how strictly this rule is followed).

DOMESTIC UNIT

- [Settlement Patterns \(361\)](#)
- [Division Of Labor By Gender \(462\)](#)
- [Standard Of Living \(511\)](#)
- [Residence \(591\)](#)
- [Household \(592\)](#)
- [Polygamy \(595\)](#)
- [Extended Families \(596\)](#)

Families residing within a compound may contain several domestic units, each typically consisting of a husband and wife with their dependent children living in a single house or apartment. Adult sons live patrilocally within the same compound, usually occupying a separate house with their own wife and children. Polygynous men are expected to provide a house for each wife and her children. To avoid co-wife jealousy, some men build or rent homes in different neighborhoods or towns. Urban migrants may live neolocally, though they will often receive short- and long-term visits from kin. In terms of household provisions, men are responsible for purchasing staple dry goods like corn flour, rice, and yams, while women buy daily ingredients for the sauce, such as tomatoes, onions, hot peppers, oil, and fish or meat. Men are thought of as breadwinners; their main obligations are to provide a home and financial security, and to support children's school fees. Women control their own income and may be financially independent, but they often feel compelled to cover expenses perceived as men's responsibility when men fail to do so. Women and children perform most of the domestic duties, including childcare, cleaning, cooking, and washing clothes.

INHERITANCE

- [Real Property \(423\)](#)

[Inheritance \(428\)](#)
[Family Relationships \(593\)](#)
[Lineages \(613\)](#)

Houses and property that belong to a corporate patrilineal family are inherited communally through the patriline. But when family elders agree to individual ownership of these lands they take on the same qualities as other private possessions and are passed on to the owner's children, or to siblings in the event that the owner is childless. Males and females can both inherit property from their parents, including land and other movable property, and during their lifetimes people can name the heirs of particular possessions.

SOCIALIZATION

[Speech \(191\)](#)
[Gender Status \(562\)](#)
[Extended Families \(596\)](#)
[Premarital Sex Relations \(836\)](#)
[Conception \(842\)](#)
[Infant Care \(854\)](#)
[Child Care \(855\)](#)
[Techniques Of Socialization \(861\)](#)
[Transmission Of Cultural Norms \(867\)](#)
[Transmission Of Skills \(868\)](#)
[Education System \(871\)](#)
[Adolescent Activities \(883\)](#)

Newborns are a source of joy and wealth to a family, and babies are coddled and caressed by all members of the extended family. As they mature, children are given greater responsibility and treated with stronger discipline. Crying toddlers and older children are often felt to have brought the trouble on themselves and are either ignored or criticized harshly. Physical punishment is common for children who lack respect, fail to follow orders, or are suspected of some form of deceit. By the age of six or seven, girls are enlisted to help in caring for younger siblings; they and older siblings will mimic their parents in disciplining younger children. At ten to twelve years old, girls are responsible for sweeping the home, fetching water or firewood, running errands at a neighbor's house or in the market, and doing some basic cooking. Boys have fewer domestic responsibilities but also run errands for their parents and perform household tasks. Children spend a great deal of time in the home and with extended family members. They often visit with relatives in other towns, even living with them for years at a time. Some of these fosterage arrangements can be exploitative, with relatives treating the child as a servant, or in some cases as a virtual slave. Children may learn professional skills from their parents, for example by joining them to work in the agricultural fields or, in the case of girls, by following their mothers to buy and sell goods in other towns or to staff a market stall in the mother's absence. Except in the most remote rural areas, nearly all children attend school where they receive instruction under the strict discipline of the teachers. In school, children begin to learn French, the official language of Benin. There are community programs to teach Fon literacy, but these are outside of the formal schooling system and have a limited success among adult learners, whose attendance is irregular. Parents value boys' education more than girls' because education is considered less important for girls' future commercial and domestic roles (Falen 2011). The result is that girls leave school at an earlier age and achieve less mastery of French and other academic skills that would prepare them for higher jobs in government and business. Sexual experimentation may begin in the teenage years, particularly among more liberated urban families. Dating in the Western sense is still rare, but young couples steal moments together outside of school or family, and unplanned pregnancies are relatively common.

SOCIOPOLITICAL ORGANIZATION

SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

[Retail Marketing \(443\)](#)
[Mutual Aid \(476\)](#)

[Household \(592\)](#)
[Family Relationships \(593\)](#)
[Kin Relationships \(602\)](#)
[Lineages \(613\)](#)
[Congregations \(794\)](#)

The basic unit of Fon social organization is kinship. Family membership and loyalty through patrilineal descent is the basis of residence, communal property inheritance, and surname. As a family grows or encounters disputes, brothers may separate and the family fissions. Society is also organized around commerce and occupational specialization, as people produce food or other commodities in one location and sell them in others. Carpenters, hairdressers, and artisans can be found throughout small towns and villages, performing their services for a local clientele. Social institutions like churches, mosques, and indigenous religious societies convene meetings and hold ceremonies with worshippers. Religious groups and cooperative work groups may have regional or national associations that hold meetings to promote their activities.

POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

[Cities \(633\)](#)
[Form And Rules Of Government \(642\)](#)
[Chief Executive \(643\)](#)
[Advisers To The Chief Executive \(645\)](#)
[External Relations \(648\)](#)
[Taxation And Public Income \(651\)](#)
[Elections \(666\)](#)
[Revolution \(669\)](#)

The precolonial Kingdom of Dahomey exhibited a high level of central authority wielded by the royal family in the palace of Abomey, though village chiefs still controlled daily decisions at the local level. Until the conquest of 1892, the king of Dahomey appointed a group of ministers to assist in governing, waging war, collecting taxes, and supervising traditional religious practices (Bay 1998). Each minister had a female counterpart who contributed to the duties of the office. Royal succession was guided by *Fa* divination, which was required to approve the heir to the throne. During the French colonial period, Fon territory was governed through varying attempts at direct and indirect rule, and while the royal family had no official authority they retained moral and social influence. After independence in 1960, the country experienced a number of coups, political instability, and a Marxist military dictatorship. Beginning in 1991, Benin formed a multi-party, multi-ethnic democratic government in which Fon people participate. Ethnic and home-town loyalty for political candidates is pronounced. Bureaucratic elected representatives exist at provincial, town, and neighborhood levels, and have largely replaced inherited, customary chiefs, though the royal family still recognizes a hereditary king who wields informal authority in Abomey.

SOCIAL CONTROL

[Age Stratification \(561\)](#)
[Social Relationships And Groups \(571\)](#)
[Visiting And Hospitality \(574\)](#)
[Etiquette \(576\)](#)
[Household \(592\)](#)
[Family Relationships \(593\)](#)
[Social Control \(626\)](#)
[Sorcery \(754\)](#)
[Revelation And Divination \(787\)](#)
[Magicians And Diviners \(791\)](#)
[Priesthood \(793\)](#)
[Techniques Of Socialization \(861\)](#)

Fon society is characterized by age hierarchy, with older people enjoying respect and authority in political, commercial, and domestic spheres. Younger people are rebuked for speaking out of turn or attempting to assert authority over their elders. Family authority is held mainly by the *daa* (household

head), though elder family members of both genders are responsible for governing a household, making decisions, and carrying out punishment. Traditionally, the *vigan* (head of the children) was another authority figure who acted as an intermediary between the family and the *daa*, often in cooperation with senior women, called *tanyinon*. By the turn of the twenty-first century, these two positions had come to represent primarily informal authority and occupy a ceremonial role. Children are disciplined physically and verbally. Family solidarity and group identity are reinforced through communal living and the sharing of resources within a compound. Food is shared among kin and friends, and family ceremonies demand the presence and financial contributions of all members. Repeated failure to participate or reciprocate is regarded as a serious affront, a sign of selfishness, and damaging to relationships. Patron-client relationships based on wealth differential generate the flow of resources from wealthy to poor. This has the potential to reduce jealousy and produce an economic leveling effect, though highly prosperous individuals tend to migrate out of the family compound and construct more ostentatious homes in other towns in order to escape financial obligations to their less fortunate kin. Christian ministers and priests, indigenous healers, and traditional religious leaders exert control over their congregations, and may be influential in local affairs. Diviners who interpret *Fa* divination are consulted about important matters, including upcoming travel, illness, business deals, the naming of a new *daa*, and social tensions surrounding witchcraft.

CONFLICT

[Ingroup Antagonisms \(578\)](#)
[Family Relationships \(593\)](#)
[Polygamy \(595\)](#)
[Informal In Group Justice \(627\)](#)
[Sex And Marital Offenses \(684\)](#)
[Judicial Authority \(692\)](#)
[Sorcery \(754\)](#)

At the interpersonal level, conflict is usually the result of jealousy or perceived selfishness. Within a family, the ideals of solidarity and sharing are in tension with the desire to acquire wealth and independence. Despite the façade of unity, there may be mistrust between family members, giving rise to fears and accusations of witchcraft. Most conflicts within a family, among friends, or between business partners involve monetary disputes, theft, and betrayal. Husbands and wives have different family loyalties and separate financial accounts, and they quarrel over financial matters such as household expenses and school costs (Falen 2011). Another major source of marital discord is infidelity or co-wife jealousy. Family disputes are heard by elders or the *daa*, and marital disputes may provoke a meeting of elders from both families. A bureaucratic legal system operates for the serious offenses of theft or murder, though informal mediation is also common, and may be managed by a court-appointed community member or by a locally elected delegate.

RELIGION AND EXPRESSIVE CULTURE

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

[Sorcery \(754\)](#)
[Cult Of The Dead \(769\)](#)
[General Character Of Religion \(771\)](#)
[Cosmology \(772\)](#)
[Mythology \(773\)](#)
[Spirits And Gods \(776\)](#)
[Theological Systems \(779\)](#)
[Religious Denominations \(795\)](#)
[Organized Ceremonial \(796\)](#)

All Fon recognize a creator god named *Mawu*, though people practice many different religious and spiritual traditions, both indigenous and foreign in origin. Catholicism is the largest Christian denomination, followed by the Celestial Church of Christ and numerous other Protestant and evangelical churches (Alokpo 1996, Henry 2008, Mayrargue 2001). A small minority practice Islam,

or follow foreign esoteric traditions like Rosicrucianism, Freemasonry, and Eckankar. Vodun is the traditional animistic religion, involving ancestors and spirits of the natural world. The main deities are *Lisa*, spirit of the sun and sometimes male counterpart to the female creator of *Mawu*; *Sakpata*, spirit of the earth and smallpox; *Hevioso*, spirit of thunder and lightning; *Tohosu*, spirit of malformed and stillborn children; *Dan*, spirit of snakes and the rainbow; *Gu*, spirit of iron; and *Legba*, a trickster spirit of virility and messenger between the deities. The Fon royal totemic ancestor Agasu has a cult devoted to him named *Nensuhwe*. Other deities have arrived among the Fon more recently, such as *Mami Wata*, *Koku*, and *Atingale*. At the turn of the twenty-first century the most popular of these new deities was *Tron*, arriving from Ghana and Togo in the twentieth century (Tall 1995). Secret societies related to Vodun include *Egungun*, *Zangbeto*, and *Oro*. *Egungun* was adopted from the Yoruba as a mystical order charged with honoring the ancestors by calling costumed ghosts to dance at ceremonies. *Zangbeto*, originating in Porto-Novo, are spiritual entities that were traditionally considered guardians of the night, patrolling in grass-covered costumes, but by the turn of the twenty-first century they were increasingly being seen as a folklore group holding ceremonies and performing magic to audiences. *Oro* is another secret society of the night, acquired from Yoruba (Nago) peoples, and it is a deity that comes out at night screaming its warning to women and uninitiated men to stay indoors or risk its magical retribution. The numerous borrowings of deities and spiritual traditions make clear that the Fon are extremely receptive to foreign religious ideas. There are also magical beliefs about witchcraft and sorcery, the fear of which promotes all forms of religious participation, and may prompt people to follow multiple religions or spiritual traditions concurrently in order to achieve the most protection.

RELIGIOUS PRACTITIONERS

[Shamans And Psychotherapists \(756\)](#)

[Revelation And Divination \(787\)](#)

[Magicians And Diviners \(791\)](#)

[Priesthood \(793\)](#)

Catholic priests and Christian ministers are the church leaders, while diviners, Vodun priests, and their adepts are the main practitioners of traditional religion. Diviners, or *bokonon*, interpret the will of the *Fa* divination oracle and prescribe actions, ceremonies and offerings to appease the spirits. Vodun priests are known as *Vodunon*, and they direct troupes of mostly female adepts, called *Vodunsi*, literally meaning "wife of the Vodun". Adepts learn the ritual protocol, songs, and dances of their deity, and may become possessed during ceremonial dances. Traditional healers and other mystics offer spiritual guidance and protection from witchcraft and sorcery.

CEREMONIES

[Burial Practices And Funerals \(764\)](#)

[Cult Of The Dead \(769\)](#)

[Spirits And Gods \(776\)](#)

[Revelation And Divination \(787\)](#)

[Magicians And Diviners \(791\)](#)

[Organized Ceremonial \(796\)](#)

Traditional religious life revolves around divination, offerings and animal sacrifice, and possession dances by the adepts of Vodun deities. Most families perform annual rites to honor their ancestors by giving them food and drink. Funerals are lavish, costly affairs that bring together friends and family for all-night celebrations with food, drink, and dancing. Among Christians, the important ceremonies are christenings, baptisms, and weddings.

ARTS

[Ceramic Technology \(323\)](#)

[Public Structures \(344\)](#)

[Visual Arts \(5311\)](#)

[Music \(533\)](#)

[Dance \(535\)](#)

[Spirits And Gods \(776\)](#)

Fon people enjoy a wide variety of music, including traditional religious music and popular genres on the national and international scene. Traditional music is based in named rhythms and their accompanying dances, like *zenli*. Plastic arts include carving, bronze figurines, and cloth appliqué. The palace museum in Abomey houses tourist art based on these traditional art forms, and the palace walls are adorned with traditional bas-reliefs depicting the history of Dahomey (Piqué 1999). Practical pottery products include cook stoves and earthenware jars for collecting water. Sculpted figurines are used in the representation of traditional deities and for magical purposes (Blier 1995).

MEDICINE

[Hospitals And Clinics \(743\)](#)

[Sorcery \(754\)](#)

[Shamans And Psychotherapists \(756\)](#)

[Medical Therapy \(757\)](#)

[Medical Personnel \(759\)](#)

[Vocational Education \(874\)](#)

Biomedical and traditional medical systems coexist. There is a teaching hospital in Cotonou, and provincial capitals have hospitals that carry out all but the most difficult procedures. Clinics or dispensaries are found in smaller towns and villages. Traditional healers use herbal infusions to treat headache, diarrhea, stomach ache, and pregnancy complications, among other conditions. For supernatural illness related to witchcraft or sorcery, biomedical doctors may refer patients to traditional healers who use spiritual techniques, animal sacrifice, and protective charms. People seek both traditional and biomedical strategies in an effort to find relief for their pain or illness.

DEATH AND AFTERLIFE

[Burial Practices And Funerals \(764\)](#)

[Cult Of The Dead \(769\)](#)

[Eschatology \(775\)](#)

[Sacred Objects And Places \(778\)](#)

For Christians, the afterlife is conceived as heaven, and good deeds done in the present life are rewarded in the hereafter. For Vodun practitioners, death is more akin to a rite of passage to another status. Funerals are important events where people negotiate the meaning of life and death, and where family tensions often erupt in disputes over expenses and the type of ceremony (Noret 2010). Ancestors are believed to maintain supernatural influence over their living kin, earning them respect and deference. Important ancestors are often represented by a metal staff known as *asen*, which is placed in the family's ancestral shrine to receive offerings at annual ceremonies (Bay 2008). In addition to annual offerings, on a daily basis people may pour a few drops of water or alcohol on the ground as a gesture of communion with the ancestors. There is a type of reincarnation whereby one component of a person's soul, the *joto*, is inherited from a deceased ancestor (Maupoil 1943).

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