

# History

West Africa may be the poorest region on earth, but it wasn't always that way. The now-dusty plains of the Sahel and southern Sahara were home to some of the richest and most extravagant empires in the world during the Middle Ages, empires which were centres as much of world-renowned scholarship as of wealth. As these empires crumbled, weakened by greed and foreign conquest, West Africa fell under the sway of Islam, and to the European colonial invaders who followed in the footsteps of explorers, slave traders and adventurers – all drawn by rumours of the region's riches. West Africa, whose modern political borders bear little relation to the territories of its many ethno-linguistic groups, has been in decline ever since.

This section provides an overview of the history of the region, focusing on the period before European influence significantly penetrated the interior. For accounts of the colonial and postcolonial periods in each country, see the individual country chapters.

## FIRST FOOTPRINTS ON THE SAHEL

Some archaeological evidence has been found of early human occupation in West Africa. Tools and other artefacts found in Senegal, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania and elsewhere, date back to 200,000 BC and are attributed to *Homo erectus*, the predecessor of *Homo sapiens* (modern man).

The picture starts to become a little clearer somewhere between 6000 and 10,000 years ago, when agricultural development began in the regions now occupied by the Sahara desert. At the time, most of West Africa (including what is now the Sahel and the Sahara) was the earth's idyll, home to lakes, rainforests and a pleasant Mediterranean climate. Rock art in the Aïr Mountains of northern Niger (see the boxed text, p609) from the period depicts giraffes, elephants and leopards being hunted by what are assumed to be hunter-gatherer societies.

From around 5000 BC, global climate changes caused the savanna to begin to dry out, thereby beginning the long process of turning the Sahara into a desert. Agriculture became difficult and farmers were forced to migrate to areas south of the savanna (the area today known as the Sahel), where the vegetation was also thinning but soils were still fertile.

As the land dried out and the animals that sustained hunting societies became more scarce, most of West Africa's peoples forsook transient life and settled in communities. By between 4000 and 3000 BC, people had domesticated cattle and were also cultivating and harvesting indigenous plants, including millet (a cereal crop), yam (root tubers) and rice. The shift to more sedentary communities was further confirmed by later Saharan rock art and finds of pottery shards, stone hoes, digging tools and hand-scythes used for cutting grasses.

## VILLAGES OF STONE

The shift to farming had far-reaching implications for the region. The land – suddenly able to support larger populations – became more intensively inhabited, with people living in much closer proximity than

ever before. With village life and growing populations came the need for systems of administration, cooperation and control.

It has been said that the history of Africa resides in the belly of the termite, and remarkably little evidence has been found to chart this momentous period in the history of the region. Nonetheless, the earliest signs of organised society in West Africa date from around 1500 BC, in present-day Mauritania, where the remains of stone villages and domestic animals have been found. Similar remains have been found in what is now northern Nigeria. Centuries of subsequent building have buried such remains elsewhere, but it seems likely that settlements of this kind existed across the Sahel, which was much more densely vegetated than it is today.

Of the early societies that inhabited the Sahel during this period, two dominant groups emerged, the first along the Niger River, and the second around Lake Chad – both areas where soils were fertile and well suited to agriculture. These groups built large stone villages and even towns, and were in contact with other African peoples, particularly those living on the southern shores of the Mediterranean.

## THE IRON REVOLUTION

In the same way that climate change once transformed West Africa, the introduction of iron ushered in sweeping changes for the peoples of the region.

The earliest evidence of iron-working in West Africa is found in central Nigeria and dates from around 450 BC. Iron tools were much more efficient than those made from stone or bronze. It became possible to clear forests, which at once enabled people to dramatically expand the amount of land under cultivation (especially for cereal production), and therefore feed more people, and commenced the process of denuding the landscape. Although population numbers at the time suggest that an

Saharan rock art contains sophisticated but curious depictions of horse-drawn chariots driven by the forerunners to today's trans-Saharan overlancers, leading some to speculate that the Romans reached further south than was previously thought.

Knowledge of iron-working is thought to have been introduced to the region from Egypt via the Nile Valley and Lake Chad, although some authorities believe that the use of iron actually originated in West Africa, and that the knowledge went the other way, to Egypt.

### AFRICA ON THE MOVE

The changes set in motion by West Africa's increasingly widespread use of iron didn't just plant the seeds for future environmental pressures, it also began the process of remapping West Africa's human landscape.

As lands were cleared and settlements arose, people began to expand or migrate into new territories. These were not sudden mass movements of people, but rather gradual expansions over hundreds of years. At first, they consisted of many short moves – from valley to valley, or from one cultivation area to the next. Slowly, dominant peoples began to absorb other, weaker groups through intermarriage and assimilation.

The most successful migratory group in Africa were the Bantu people, whose current territory is almost a continent away from where they began. Originally from what is now Nigeria and Cameroon, the Bantu began to slowly make their way eastward and southward through the forests of Central Africa. The migration, which began around 2000 BC, gathered momentum after the introduction of iron, and by 100 BC the Bantu had reached the East African plateau. Over the next thousand years they moved down the continent as far as present-day Zimbabwe and South Africa. Today, the vast majority of indigenous peoples in Africa south of the equator are of Bantu origin. The only West African countries with significant Bantu populations are Nigeria and Cameroon – those who stayed behind.

*Africa: The Biography of the Continent*, by John Reader, is ambitious in its sweep but has good sections on the early history of the continent, which other writers often bypass.

The historical context of Saharan rock art is informatively discussed and beautifully illustrated in *African Rock Art*, by David Coulson and Alec Campbell.

### TIMELINE 200,000 BC

Human beings make their first appearance in West Africa

### 5000 BC

Rains become infrequent and the Sahara begins to be transformed into a desert

### 450 BC

Iron starts being used in West Africa, ultimately changing the human and natural map of the region

### 300 BC

Jenné-Jeno, West Africa's first-known urban settlement is founded

equilibrium was maintained between human needs and environmental preservation, the advent of iron began the conflict between the two, and provided the origins for some of West Africa's most pressing modern threats; for more information on this see p86.

Jenné-Jeno, in present-day Mali (p506), established around 300 BC, is believed to have been one of the earliest urban settlements in West Africa, and one where iron was used. Similar settlements were most likely established elsewhere around this time and, by AD 500, towns and villages were dotted across the region. The father of West African cities, Jenné-Jeno continued to grow, however, and by AD 800 was home to an estimated 27,000 people.

## WEST AFRICA'S GOLDEN AGE

By the end of the 1st millennium AD, Saharan trade routes were among the most lucrative in the world, with salt, gold, silver, ivory and slaves all being transported across the desert. The result was that the early settlements on the desert fringe grew into city-states which became increasingly large, wealthy and influential.

### Empire of Ghana

The Empire of Ghana (which has no geographic connection with the present-day country) was the first major state of its kind established in West Africa. Founded in AD 300, Ghana was, by the 5th century, an established centre of the Soninké people. By the 8th century, Ghana profited not only from control of trans-Saharan trade, but also from exploiting the massive gold deposits that fed its legends – rumour had it that the streets were paved with gold, that Ghana's gold mines supplied two-thirds of the world's gold, and that the emperor of Ghana routinely tied his horse to a nugget of pure gold.

The capital of Ghana was Koumbi Saleh, in present-day Mauritania, about 200km north of modern Bamako (Mali). At its height, the empire covered much of present-day Mali and parts of eastern Senegal.

### THE BLACKSMITH – MASTER OF THE BLACK ARTS

Not only did the increasing availability of iron propel a redrawing of Africa's human dispersal and have massive ramifications in terms of agricultural possibility, it also spawned one of Africa's most curious phenomena – the aura around the blacksmith. In almost all societies of West Africa, blacksmiths occupy a special role, at once feared and respected due to their daily and almost mystical communion with the basic elements of iron and fire. This status still places them at the heart of traditional ceremonies, bequeaths them the inherited and privileged role of intermediaries, and provides an unbroken connection to West Africa's past.

Among the Tuareg, for example, blacksmiths (known as *inaden*) produce numerous items essential to daily life (such as weapons and jewellery), but they're also healers, herbalists, poets, singers, skilled sacrificers of animals, advisers in matters of tradition and the custodians of oral traditions. Noble women confide in the *inaden*, use them as go-betweens in marriage negotiations and as mediators in love affairs. So important are they that no Tuareg festival could be complete without *inaden* participation, and anyone who tries to prevent them from attending is shunned by the whole community.

*Empires of Medieval West Africa: Ghana, Mali, and Songhay*, by David Conrad, covers the sweep of West Africa's three greatest historical empires in one accessible tome.

*Into Africa: A Journey through the Ancient Empires*, by Marq de Villiers and Sheila Hirtle, looks at Africa's past through the prism of modern journeys through the region – it's a book you'll dip into again and again.

### THE EPIC OF SUNDIATA

In the annals of West African history and legend, few tales have endured like the story of Sundiata Keita. In the 13th century, a sacred hunter prophesied to a Malinké king, who was best known as 'Maghan the Handsome' and who possessed no great power, that if he married an ugly woman, she would one day bear him a son who would become a great and powerful king, known to all the world. Maghan followed the seer's advice, but when his son Sundiata was born, he was disabled and unable to walk. When Maghan's successors battled for the throne, Sundiata was bypassed and forced into exile, only to return one day as king. When he defeated his more powerful Sosso rivals in 1240, he was crowned 'Mansa', or 'King of Kings', whereafter he founded the Empire of Mali, with its capital at his village of Niani, close to the Guinea-Mali border. He drowned in 1255 but his legend lives on in the tales of *griots* and in songs that drew heavily on his story, recorded by most of West Africa's best modern musicians.

Islam was introduced by traders from the north, and although it was adopted by local merchants and some members of the political elite, its half-hearted application sowed the seeds of Ghana's destruction. The empire was destroyed in the late 11th century by the better-armed Muslim Berbers of the Almoravid Empire from Mauritania and Morocco.

### Empire of Mali

In the middle of the 13th century, Sundiata Keita, leader of the Malinké people, founded the Empire of Mali in the region between the present-day countries of Senegal and Niger. By the beginning of the 14th century, the empire had expanded further, controlling almost all trans-Saharan trade. This brought great wealth to the rulers of Mali, who embraced Islam with enthusiasm.

During this period the trans-Saharan trade reached its peak, and the wealth created meant that Mali's main cities became major centres of finance and culture. The most notable was Timbuktu, where two Islamic universities were founded, and Arab architects from Granada (in modern-day Spain) were employed to design new mosques, such as Timbuktu's Dyingerey Ber mosque (p522).

### Empire of Songhai

While Mali was at the height of its powers, the Songhai people had established their own city-state to the east, around Gao in present-day Mali. As Mali descended into decadence and royal squabbles, Gao became powerful and well organised. At its height, the empire stretched from close to Lake Chad in the east to the hinterland of the Atlantic Coast in the west. Its emperors were reported to have travelled to Mecca with 300,000 gold pieces.

A hallmark of the Empire of Songhai was the creation of a professional army and a civil service with provincial governors. The state even subsidised Muslim scholars, judges and doctors. By the mid-15th century, the Empire of Songhai was at its most powerful and presided over most of West Africa, and by the 16th century, Timbuktu was an important commercial city with about 100,000 inhabitants. The golden period ended with an invasion by Berber armies from Morocco in 1591.

If the story of Sundiata has captured your imagination, *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali*, by DT Niane, is the best and most easily accessible version around today.

By the middle of the 15th century, the Empire of Songhai was the great power of the region and, after capturing Timbuktu, its forces finally took Djenné after a siege that lasted for seven years, seven months and seven days.

## AD 300

The Empire of Ghana begins its 800-year rule

## 900

Islam first reaches the Sahel

## Late-11th century

The Empire of Ghana is destroyed by the Berber armies of the Almoravid Empire

## 1240

Sundiata Keita is crowned 'King of Kings' and founds the Empire of Mali

### MALI – LAND OF KINGS

Mali's heyday in the 14th century was characterised by ambitious and extravagant kings, whose deeds caught the attention of the world. One such monarch, King Abubakari II, sent an expedition across the Atlantic in an attempt to discover the Americas. When only one ship returned, with stories of a great river running through the ocean's heart, the king was undeterred. He himself led a second expedition of 200 ships. Not a single ship returned.

King Abubakari's anointed successor was King Kankan Musa (the grandnephew of Sundiata Keita), who has a strong case to be called one of the most legendary of all African kings. In 1324 he made his pilgrimage to Mecca, accompanied by an entourage of more than 60,000 people and needing 500 slaves to carry all the gold. Along the way he gave away so much of his gold as gifts, that the world price of gold did not recover for 12 years, some say a generation. His actions attracted the attention of European merchants in Cairo and news spread quickly about a land of fabulous wealth in the desert's heart. King Kankan Musa was even depicted on a 1375 European map of Africa in which he was shown holding a gold nugget.

Generous as he was, King Kankan Musa was not the world's shrewdest financial manager. During his return journey from Mecca, he was so poor that he had to depend on the charity of towns along the way.

Mali's ancient kings were at the forefront of efforts to abolish slavery, most notably the legendary Sundiata Keita, founder of the Empire of Mali, who included a clause prohibiting slavery in his Charter of Kurukanfuga.

BBC World Service's 'The Story of Africa' ([www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/africa/features/storyofafrica](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/africa/features/storyofafrica)) is a good introduction to West Africa's ancient kingdoms and contains links to research sites on the subject.

### Later States & Empires

As the Empire of Mali declined, the Wolof people established the Empire of Jolof (also spelt Yollof) near the site of present-day Dakar in Senegal. Meanwhile, on the southeastern fringe of the Songhai realm, the Hausa people created several powerful city-states, such as Katsina, Kano and Zinder (still important trading towns today), but they never amalgamated into a single empire.

Further east again, on the shores of Lake Chad, the Kanem-Borno Empire was founded in the early 14th century. At its height it covered a vast area including parts of present-day Niger, Nigeria, Chad and Cameroon, before being loosely incorporated into the Songhai sphere of influence; it nonetheless remained a powerful force in the region until the 19th century.

To the south, between the 13th and 16th centuries, several smaller states arose in areas where gold was produced. These included the kingdoms of Benin (in present-day Nigeria), Dahomey (Benin), Mossi (Burkina Faso) and Akan-Ashanti (Ghana); see the individual country chapters for more information.

### EUROPEAN FOOTHOLDS

Trans-Saharan trade had carried gold from the coastal regions, via the Mediterranean, to the courts and treasuries of countries such as England, France, Spain and Portugal. As early as the 13th century the financial stability of several major European powers depended largely on the supply of West African gold. European royalty became obsessed with rumours of fabulously wealthy kingdoms south of the Sahara, although no European had yet visited the region.

Prince Henry of Portugal (Henry the Navigator, 1394–1460) was the first to act, encouraging explorers to sail down the coast of West Africa, which soon became known as Guinea. His intention was to bypass the

Arab and Muslim domination of the trans-Saharan gold trade and reach the source by sea. The prince's goal would ultimately come to fruition and change the course of West African history.

In 1443 Portuguese ships reached the mouth of the Senegal River. Later voyages reached Sierra Leone (1462) and Fernando Po (now Bioko in Equatorial Guinea, off the coast of Nigeria) in 1472. As the Portuguese made contact with local chiefs and began to trade for gold and ivory, West Africa turned on its axis, the focus of its trade (and power) shifting from the Sahara to the coast as the great empires of the Sahel lost their monopoly.

In 1482 the Portuguese built a fortified trading post at Elmina (p363), on the coast of today's Ghana, which was the earliest European structure in sub-Saharan Africa. By 1500, Portuguese ships had also sailed some distance upstream along the Senegal and Gambia Rivers. But West Africa had few other large rivers that allowed access to the interior, and most trade remained on the coast.

### ISLAM IN THE SAHEL

Islam first reached the Sahel around AD 900, via trans-Saharan traders from present-day Morocco and Algeria. Perhaps not surprisingly, for a religion born in the desert, Islam quickly became the religion of the rulers and the wealthy in West Africa. Although ordinary people generally preferred to retain their traditional beliefs, rulers skilfully combined aspects of Islam and traditional religion in the administration of the state, thereby creating the fusion of beliefs that remains a feature of West African life today.

Islam cemented its position as the dominant religion in the Sahel in the 17th and 18th centuries, filling the vacuum left by the now defunct Sahelian empires. Spiritual power was fused with political and economic hegemony, and Islamic jihads (holy wars) were declared on nonbelievers and backed up by the powers of the state. In time, several Muslim states were established, including Futa Toro (in northern Senegal), Futa Djallon (Guinea), Masina (Mali) and the Sokoto state of Hausaland (Niger and Nigeria).

### EUROPE DECIDES TO STAY

While Islam was becoming firmly established, Europeans began to penetrate the interior. One explorer, Mungo Park – a Scottish doctor who travelled from the Gambia River to reach the Niger River in present-day Mali, and determined that the Niger flowed from west to east – was enslaved for a time by Moors, and later died in an attack on his boat. Later explorers included Frenchman René Caillié, the first European to reach the fabled city of Timbuktu, in 1828, and return home alive; the prolific Heinrich Barth, who stayed for a time in Agadez, Kano and Timbuktu in the 1850s and also lived to tell the tale; Scotsman Hugh Clapperton, who reached Kano in northern Nigeria; and the English brothers Richard and John Lander, who finally established that the Niger River flowed into the Atlantic, thereby solving one of the great geographical questions of the age.

As European influence grew in the first half of the 19th century, jihads were fought less against 'infidel' Africans, and more against Europeans –

Some historians believe that the Gambia River's name (and indeed the name of the country) derives from the Portuguese word *cambio*, meaning 'exchange' or 'trade'.

*Travels in the Interior of Africa*, by Mungo Park, is an epic tale of exploration on the Niger River; you'll find yourself asking how he stays so cheerful in the face of overwhelming hardship.

### 1443

Portuguese ships reach the mouth of the Senegal River

### Mid-15th century

The Empire of Songhai is at the height of its powers and rules over much of West Africa

### 16th century

Timbuktu has become a great centre of scholarship and wealth, and is home to 100,000 people

### 17th century

Islam becomes the dominant religion across the Sahel

## SLAVERY IN WEST AFRICA

Slavery had existed in West Africa for many centuries, but it gained momentum with the arrival of Islam, despite the fact that the Qur'an prohibits the enslavement of Muslims. The Moors, Tuareg and Soninke in particular were known as slave traders. Later, the Portuguese escalated the trade, taking slaves to work on the large sugar plantations in Portuguese colonies on the other side of the Atlantic (including present-day Brazil) between 1575 and 1600.

By the 17th and 18th centuries, other European nations (particularly England, Spain, France and Holland) had established colonies in the Americas, and were growing sugar, tobacco, cotton and other crops. Huge profits could be made from these commodities, and the demand for slaves to work the plantations was insatiable.

In most cases, European traders encouraged Africans on the coast to attack neighbouring tribes and take captives. These were brought to the coastal slaving stations and exchanged for European goods such as cloth and guns, perpetuating a vicious cycle that enabled more tribes to be invaded and more slaves to be captured. A triangular trans-Atlantic trade route developed – the slaves were loaded onto ships and transported to the Americas, the raw materials they produced were transported to Europe, and the finished goods were transported from Europe to Africa once again, to be exchanged for slaves and to keep the whole system moving. The demand for slaves was maintained because conditions on the plantations were so bad that life expectancy after arriving in the Americas was often no more than a few years.

Exact figures are impossible to come by, but it is estimated that from the end of the 15th century until around 1870, when the slave trade was abolished, as many as 20 million Africans were captured. Up to half of these died, mostly while being transported in horribly overcrowded and unhealthy conditions, and 'only' around 10 million actually arrived in the Americas. The trade only came to an end when a liberalisation of attitudes brought on by the Enlightenment changed attitudes and, more expediently, the Industrial Revolution led to a demand for stable, compliant colonies supplying raw materials and providing a market for finished goods.

Although the trade in slaves became, for the most part, a thing of the past, there remains evidence – hotly disputed by governments – that people continue to be born into, and live their whole lives in slavery, especially in Mali, Mauritania and Niger. A local NGO in Niger, Timidria, issued a damning report in 2003, which suggested that slavery remained widespread in the country. The report, produced in conjunction with **Anti-Slavery International** (☎ 020 7501 8920; www.antislavery.org; The Stableyard, Broomgrove Rd, London SW9 9TL, UK) and available on its website, makes for sober reading, and suggests that slavery is yet to be consigned to history.

particularly against the French, who were pushing deeper into the West African interior. The most notable leader of the time was Omar Tall (also spelled Umar Taal), who led a major campaign against the French in the interior of Senegal from around 1850 until he was killed in 1864. After his death, the jihads known as the 'Marabout Wars' persisted in Senegal until the 1880s.

Despite growing penetration of the West African interior, the main European powers were largely confined to pockets of territory on the coast, among them the French enclave of Dakar (Senegal), and the British ports of Freetown (Sierra Leone) and Lagos (Nigeria). Portugal was no longer a major force, but had retained some territory – notably, Bissau, capital of today's Guinea-Bissau.

As these colonies became established, and with the major European powers apparently in for the long haul, often brutal military expeditions

were sent to the interior (the French marched into the Sahel while the British confined themselves to Ghana, Nigeria and Cameroon). Various minor treaties were made with local chiefs, but Europe's African domains were more a matter of unspoken understandings between European powers, than formal agreements or treaties.

## THE SCRAMBLE FOR AFRICA

Europe's wholesale colonisation of Africa was triggered in 1879 by King Leopold of Belgium's claim to the Congo. The feeding frenzy that followed saw Africa parcelled out among the French, British, Germans and Belgians, with the Portuguese refusing to let go of the colonies they already occupied.

Togo and Cameroon fell under German rule, Portugal held fast to Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde, Britain staked a claim in 1883 to Gambia, Sierra Leone, the Gold Coast (Ghana) and Nigeria, while the Sahel (and most of Cameroon) was largely the preserve of the French. These claims – at once military realities and colonial fantasies as many Africans had not seen a European from the country to whom his or her land now supposedly belonged – were confirmed at the Berlin Conference of 1884–85. France was awarded almost one-third of the entire continent, including much of West Africa which became known as *Afrique Occidentale Française* (French West Africa), or the French Soudan.

Thus armed with the imprimatur of their fellow colonisers, the European powers consolidated their presence in the new colonies. Although anti-European feelings ran high among Africans, local resistance was sporadic and easily quashed by well-armed European soldiers.

Despite lip service to the idea of introducing 'civilisation' to the 'heathen natives' – which had officially replaced trade as the *raison d'être* of the colonial mission – the main aim of European governments was to exploit the colonies for raw materials. In West Africa, gem and gold mining was developed, but the once gold-rich region disappointed the occupiers. Consequently, labour-intensive plantations were established, and cash crops such as coffee, cocoa, rubber, cotton and groundnuts (peanuts) soon came to dominate the economies of the fledgling colonies, and to be a major source of employment – not always voluntary or paid – for local people.

After the German defeat in WWI, Togo and Cameroon were divided between France and Britain, with the divisive effects still evident today, especially in Cameroon.

During the first half of the 20th century, France controlled its West African colonies with a firm hand, and through a policy of 'assimilation' allowed Africans to become French citizens if they virtually abandoned their African identity. Britain made no pretence of assimilation and was slightly more liberal in its approach towards its colonies. Portugal ruled its empire in Africa with a rod of iron.

In all the West African economies, however, money was spent on building infrastructure (such as the Dakar–Bamako rail line) which benefited the colonial economy, with little or no attempt to improve living standards or expand education for West Africans, let alone build the institutions on which their future depended.

*Travels & Discoveries in North and Central Africa 1849–1855*, by Heinrich Barth, is a fascinating insight into what is now Niger, Nigeria and Mali, from arguably West Africa's greatest explorer.

*The Scramble for Africa*, by Thomas Pakenham, can be a bit dry in patches, but it's a seminal text on the 1884–85 Berlin Conference and the European lust for African territory.

An outstanding piece of travel literature, Kira Salak's *Cruellest Journey: Six Hundred Miles to Timbuktu* follows in the footsteps of Mungo Park, and contains a moving account of her own bid to free two Bella slaves in Timbuktu.

To better understand the forces that drove the British campaign to abolish slavery in the 18th century, *Bury the Chains: The First International Human Rights Movement*, by Adam Hochschild, is masterful.

### 1828

Frenchman René Caillié becomes the first European to reach the fabled city of Timbuktu and return home alive

### 1850–80s

The 'Marabout Wars' are fought between Islam's holy warriors and the Europeans in Senegal

### 1870

The slave trade is officially abolished

### 1884–85

The Berlin Conference of European powers divides Africa into colonial spheres of influence



It is believed that up to 200,000 African soldiers served in the French army during WWI and a further 200,000 in WWII; during the latter, Africans accounted for 9% of the French army and at least 50,000 were killed defending France, many on French soil.

There is no finer, more readable, or up-to-date history of Africa than *The State of Africa*, by Martin Meredith, which evocatively captures the pre-independence optimism and the problems that have beset the continent ever since.

## INDEPENDENCE

After WWII, the irresistible tide of nationalism and increasingly loud cries for independence were at first fiercely resisted by France and (to a lesser extent) Britain, but the colonial rulers eventually accepted the inevitable. In 1957 Ghana became the first country in West Africa to gain independence, followed by Guinea in 1958. In 1960 independence was granted to Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria, Togo, Senegal and several other countries. Most other countries in the region became independent in the following few years, ending in 1965 with Gambia. Only recidivist Portugal held firm, not granting independence to Guinea-Bissau until 1973, and only after a bloody war.

France encouraged its former colonies to remain closely tied in a trade-based 'community', and most did; Guinea was a notable exception. In contrast, Britain reduced its power and influence in the region. The French maintained battalions of its own army in several former colonies, while the British provided more discreet military assistance.

Regardless of the approach of the former colonial powers, the first intoxicating rush of optimism after independence quickly gave way to dictatorship, corruption, an epidemic of coups d'état and massive economic problems. Independence offered West Africans greater freedom, but could not conceal the fact that colonialism had created fragile economies based on cash crops prone to huge price fluctuations, and had equipped few Africans to deal with such crises. To make matters worse, ethnic tensions created by artificial boundaries and divide-and-rule policies manifested as border disputes, separatist uprisings, military takeovers and civil wars, which continued into the 1980s. Basically, life for ordinary people became increasingly difficult.

The end of the Cold War – during which Africa became a theatre for meddling by the superpowers as the West propped up anticommunist dictators and the Soviet bloc buttressed those claiming to be Marxist – led to dramatic changes throughout West Africa, as the popular demand for democracy gained strength and multiparty elections were held in several countries. But even as democracy spread during the 1990s, West Africa's hopes of a new dawn were, not for the first time in its history, tempered somewhat by the descent into brutal civil war in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea-Bissau and, to a lesser extent, Côte d'Ivoire.

For a snapshot of West Africa today, see p29.

1957

Ghana becomes the first West African country to gain independence

2000

Côte d'Ivoire, the former poster boy for West African development, begins its descent into anarchy and civil war

# The Culture

You'd be hard pressed to find any other region of the world with such a diversity of peoples. Cameroon alone has around 280 ethnic groups in its population and Guinea-Bissau, a country of less than one million people, has at least 20. West Africa is also a fascinating study of how traditional societies are coping with the assaults of the modern world. For more information on the major ethnic groups in West Africa and their traditions, see p73.

## DAILY LIFE

West Africans are adept at juggling multiple layers of identity, with family, ethnic group and gender among the most important.

Family life is the bedrock for most West Africans. In traditional society, especially in villages, homes were arranged around a family compound and life was a communal affair – the family ate, took important decisions, celebrated and mourned together in a space that was identifiably theirs and in a family group which spanned generations. Although family remains a critical source of support for many West Africans (those who earn a salary frequently distribute it among members of their family) and such family structures remain strongly evident in many villages, things are changing.

Vast numbers of Africans have migrated to cities, where ethnic identity takes on added significance, as recent arrivals in cities gravitate towards those with whom they share a tribal or ethnic tradition. Most (but by no means all) form friendships with people from their own ethnic groups. This is particularly true of minorities.

If family and ethnic identity are fundamental foundations of a West African's existence and serve to define them in their relations within their home countries, the nation to which they belong serves to announce who they are to the rest of the world. Most West Africans proudly identify themselves as being, for example, Malian or Nigerian, suggesting that one success of post-colonial West Africa has been the building of national identity in countries whose borders often cut across longer-standing ethnic boundaries. That said, the tragic descent into conflict in Côte d'Ivoire suggests that origins remain hugely significant and a calling card that is never forgotten.

## Traditional Culture

Many West African people organise their society along hierarchical lines, with status determined by birth. At the top are traditional noble and warrior families, followed by farmers, traders and persons of lower caste, such as blacksmiths (see p32), leather-workers, woodcarvers, weavers and musicians. Slaves were once at the bottom of the social hierarchy and although this status no longer officially exists (slavery is thought to continue in Mauritania, Mali and especially Niger), many descendants of former slaves still work as tenant farmers for the descendants of their former masters.

In traditional societies, older people (especially men) are treated with deference. Teachers, doctors and other professionals (usually men) often receive similar treatment. However, modernity is increasingly eroding traditional hierarchies. The government official who shows contempt for a rural chief may actually be a member of a lower caste who went away to the city and now has an office job.

Remittances to families from West African immigrants to Europe and the United States play a huge role in West African economies and amounted to US\$1.759 billion in 1999.

*African Ceremonies*, by the finest photographic chroniclers of African traditional culture, Carol Beckwith and Angela Fisher, is a lavish, must-have coffee-table book with informative text and incomparable photos.

The average Niger woman will give birth to 7.9 children in her lifetime, maternal mortality is one of the highest in the world (1600 deaths per 100,000 live births), life expectancy hovers around 40 and only 9% of Niger's women can read and write.

## DO YOU HAVE SOMETHING FOR ME?

### Begging

In Africa, there's no government welfare cheque for the unemployed, crippled, homeless, sick or old; the only social security system is the extended family, meaning that many people are forced to beg. Because helping the needy is part of traditional African culture, and one of the pillars of Islam, you'll see even relatively poor people giving to beggars. If you want to give, even a very small coin is appreciated. If you don't have any change, just say 'next time' and at least greet the person and acknowledge their presence. If you're considering a larger donation, it's best to channel this through one of the many aid organisations working in the region.

### Cadeau

Far more pervasive than begging are the endless requests of '*Donnez-moi un cadeau*' (literally 'Give me a gift'), usually from children, but also from youths and adults. Part of this expectation comes from a belief that anyone to whom God has been good (and all foreigners are thought to be rich) should be willing to spread some wealth around.

Lest you get too paranoid, remember this. Considering the wealth of most tourists, and the unimaginable levels of poverty suffered by most West Africans, the incidence of robbery or theft in most countries in the region is incredibly low. Even a shoestring traveller's daily budget of US\$15 a day is more than the average local labourer makes in a month and the vast majority of local people are decent and hard working, seeking only the chance to make an honest living. Many requests are just 'worth a try' situations, and your polite refusal will rarely offend.

It is sometimes appropriate to give a small gift in return for a service. Simply being pointed in the right direction is not a significant service, whereas being helped for 10 minutes to find a hotel probably is. If you're not prepared to offer a tip, don't ask for significant favours. Do remember, however, that some people will help you out of genuine kindness and will not be expecting anything in return.

Things sometimes work the other way. West Africans are frequently very friendly towards foreigners, and, after just a few minutes of talking, may offer you food or a bed for the night. You may want to repay such kindness with a gift such as tea, perfume or kola nuts, but money is usually the easiest thing to give.

### Bribery

A gift or tip becomes a completely different matter when you have to pay an official to get something done (also called a *cadeau* in Francophone countries or a 'dash' in English-speaking countries). The best approach is to feign ignorance, smile a lot, be patient and simply bluff your way through. Be personable and calm, and give the official plenty of room to back down and save face. Never simply offer to pay and remember that threats or shows of anger won't get you anywhere.

There are occasionally cases where a small dash or *cadeau* is unavoidable. If you really have no choice, remember that the 'fee' is always negotiable.

At the other end of the spectrum, children rate very low on the social scale and are expected to defer to adults in all situations. Unfortunately for half the region's population, the status of women is only slightly higher.

Village festivals (*fêtes* in French), which are fundamental to traditional life, are held to honour dead ancestors, local traditional deities and to celebrate the end of harvest. They are of particular importance in traditional culture. Some festivals include singing and dancing; some favour parades, sports or wrestling matches. In some areas you may see puppets used to tell stories, or elaborate performances with masks, which play an important part in traditional life. For more information on festivals, see p21.

## Women in West Africa

Women in West Africa face a formidable array of barriers to their participation in public life on an equal footing with men. In much of the region, social mores demand that a woman is responsible for domestic work (cooking, pounding millet, child-rearing, gathering firewood), while many women also work (often as market or street vendors) to supplement meagre family incomes. Indeed it's a depressingly common sight to see women pounding millet or otherwise working hard while men lounge in the shade 'working' on their social relationships. Education of girls also lags significantly behind men, as evidenced by often appalling female literacy rates. Little wonder, therefore, that West African women are greatly under-represented in most professions – this is starkly evident for tourists in Mali, for example, where of the hundreds of accredited guides working with tourists, only one is a woman – let alone in government or at the upper levels of industry.

### MARRIAGE & POLYGAMY

In many parts of West Africa, marriage is an expensive affair. Gifts from the groom to the bride's family can easily cost several hundred dollars in a region where annual incomes of US\$200 are typical. Many men cannot afford to get married before their late 20s or 30s.

Despite the financial constraints, in traditional society (among Muslims and some non-Muslim people), men who can afford more than one wife (and many who can't) sometimes marry two, three or even four women (the Qur'an allows up to four). You will be told (by men) that women are not averse to polygamy, and that the wives become like sisters, helping each other with domestic and child-rearing duties. In reality, however, fighting and mistrust between wives is more common than marital bliss. However, there's not much women can do. Leaving a marriage simply because a husband takes another wife can bring shame to the woman and her family. She might be cast out of the family home or even physically beaten as punishment by her own father or brothers.

### FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION

Female genital mutilation (FGM), often euphemistically termed 'female circumcision' or 'genital alteration', is widespread throughout West Africa. The term covers a wide range of procedures, from a small, mainly symbolic, cut, to the total removal of the external genitalia (known as infibulation). In West Africa, the procedure usually involves removal of the entire clitoris. The World Health Organisation's estimates range from about 15% to 20% of women altered in Togo, Ghana, Niger, Cameroon and Senegal, to up to 90% in Guinea, Sierra Leone, Mali and Gambia. It's a particularly common practice among the Fulani.

Although outsiders often believe that FGM is associated with Islam, it actually predates the religion (historical records of infibulation date back 6000 years). The procedure is usually performed by midwives on girls and young women. They sometimes use modern surgical instruments, but more often it's done with a razor blade or even a piece of glass. If the procedure is done in a traditional setting the girl will not be anaesthetised, although nowadays many families take their daughters to clinics to have the procedure performed by a trained doctor. Complications, especially in the traditional setting, include infection of the wound, leading to death, or scarring which makes childbirth and urination difficult.

In West Africa, FGM is seen among traditionalists as important for maintaining traditional society. An unaltered woman would dishonour

*Africa Through the Eyes of Women Artists*, by Betty La Duke, takes a sideways glance at the African world as viewed by some of the continent's best female artists.

Musow ([www.musow.com](http://www.musow.com)) is a slick and thoroughly modern online women's lifestyle magazine (French-language) that offers a mainly Malian antidote to the grim struggles faced by most West African women.

*Female Genital Mutilation: Legal, Cultural And Medical Issues*, by Rosemarie Skaine, tackles head-on the debate about this controversial practice, canvassing in detail traditional arguments in favour and well thought-out arguments to counter them.

## TIPS ON MEETING LOCALS

Although the rush to modernisation is irretrievably changing West Africa and attitudes are becoming more liberal, especially in cities, social mores remain quite conservative. You'll make a much better first impression if you avoid public nudity, open displays of anger or affection, and vocal criticism of the government or country; with the latter, people often take such criticism personally.

### Greetings

Great importance is placed on greetings in West Africa. Muslims usually start with the traditional Islamic greetings, '*Salaam aleikum*' and '*Aleikum asalaam*' ('Peace be unto you', 'And peace be unto you'). This is followed by more questions, such as 'How are you doing?', 'How is the family?' and 'How are the people of your village?'. The reply is usually '*Al humdulillah*' (meaning 'Thanks be to God'). In villages, highly ritualised greetings can seem to last for an eternity. In cities, the traditional greetings may give way to shorter ones in French or English, but they're never forgotten. As such, it's important to use greetings whenever possible. Even for something as simple as exchanging money or asking directions, start with 'Good day, how are you? Can you help me please?' Launching straight into business is considered rude. Learning some greetings in the local language will smooth the way considerably. Even a few words make a big difference (see p861 for some useful phrases).

Handshaking is also an important part of greetings. Use a soft – rather than overly firm – handshake. Some Muslim men prefer not to shake hands with women, and West African women don't usually shake hands with their male counterparts.

### Deference

Another consideration is eye contact, which is usually avoided, especially between men and women in the Sahel. If a West African doesn't look you in the eye during a conversation, remember that they're being polite, not cold. When visiting rural settlements, it's a good idea to request to see the chief to announce your arrival and request permission before wandering through a village. You'll rarely be refused. When you meet people holding positions of authority, such as police officers, immigration officials or village chiefs (usually men), it is important to be polite.

### Conduct

How you conduct yourself can have a lasting impact on the people you meet in West Africa. Remember also that respect for local etiquette earns you respect.

- If you're in a frustrating situation, be patient, friendly and considerate. A confrontational attitude may make you feel better but it can easily inflame the situation and offend local sensibilities. Remember, you are a guest.
- Be respectful of Islamic traditions and don't wear revealing clothing; loose lightweight clothing is preferable.
- Public displays of affection are usually inappropriate, especially in Muslim areas.
- Try and learn some of the standard greetings (p861) – it will make a very good first impression.
- Ask permission to photograph people and always respect the wish of anyone who declines.
- If you agree to send someone a photo, make sure you do so.

### Dress

West Africans place great importance on appearance, and generally dress conservatively, especially in the Sahel and inland areas. Hardly surprising, therefore, that clothes worn by travellers (eg singlets, shorts or tight trousers) are often considered offensive and may mean you get treated with a certain contempt. In general, the more professional you look, the better you will be received and treated. For women, in addition to respecting local sensibilities, dressing modestly also helps minimise hassles. This is especially important in rural areas and when in the presence of chiefs or other esteemed persons.

her family and lower its position in society, as well as ruining her own chances for marriage – a circumcised woman is thought to be a moral woman, and more likely a virgin. Many believe that if left, the clitoris can make a woman infertile or damage, and even kill, her unborn children.

Although FGM is deeply ingrained in West African societies, there are moves to make it illegal. Guinea, Ghana and Burkina Faso have banned the procedure and Côte d'Ivoire is planning such a law. The governments of Benin, Ghana, Senegal, Guinea and, to a lesser extent, Burkina Faso, Guinea-Bissau and Mali have mounted public awareness campaigns against the practice.

However, there remain doubts about how effective these efforts are. Practitioners are afraid of being arrested, but find it hard to go against tradition.

## IMMIGRATION & EMIGRATION

The majority of immigrants trying to enter Europe illegally in recent years come from West Africa. Most are driven to emigrate by persecution and authoritarian governments, poverty or conflict, and their departure leaves gaping holes in the structure of traditional societies. Among the Tuareg of northern Niger, for example, entire villages have emptied of young men who have been driven to cities and neighbouring countries in search of subsistence, leaving behind, (probably forever) the nomadic lifestyle that once defined their people.

Another major problem facing West African countries is a shortage of skilled labour, especially doctors and nurses, who emigrate in search of a better life. In particular, doctors and nurses from Ghana and Nigeria help to keep the UK health system operational, while back home health services are crying out for skilled staff.

On the other side of the equation, the benefits derived from those who do reach Europe and find employment are considerable. Some traditional chiefs (especially in southern Mali) actually gather funds to pay for the fittest young man to try his luck, as those who stay behind profit hugely from remittances from Europe.

Within West Africa, Côte d'Ivoire's one-time economic miracle drew immigrants from across the region, providing much-needed labour for a booming economy and a livelihood for millions of citizens of neighbouring countries. However, the conflict in the country since 2000 has laid bare the veneer of tolerance with which many Ivorian viewed the immigrants. Second-generation immigrants – some of whom have known no country but Côte d'Ivoire – have been told that they are no longer welcome and blamed for all the country's ills.

## SPORT

West Africans love their football (soccer) and the incredible success of players in the European leagues and the emergence of Africa as a future world footballing power has served to take this passion to new heights.

The African Cup of Nations, held every two years in January, generates great enthusiasm across the continent. In the preliminary rounds, 34 national teams compete, with the 16 best teams then gathered together in one place for the final rounds. The 2002 African Cup of Nations was held in Mali with Cameroon defeating Senegal in the final to become the first team since 1967 to win successive titles. It also joined Ghana and Egypt as the only four-time winners in the cup's history (Nigeria has won two cups and Côte d'Ivoire one). In 2006 the tournament was held in Egypt and Côte d'Ivoire lost out to the home side in the final.

Amnesty International's webpage on female genital mutilation ([www.amnesty.org/ailib/intcam/femgen/fgm9.htm](http://www.amnesty.org/ailib/intcam/femgen/fgm9.htm)) has a detailed run-down on the prevalence of the practice in 16 West African countries (only Cape Verde is excluded).

The Sussex Centre for Migration Research ([www.gdrc.org/icm/remittance/mwp15.pdf](http://www.gdrc.org/icm/remittance/mwp15.pdf)) has detailed analysis of the importance of remittances to West Africa, which is hugely informative but makes for somewhat dry reading.

For the latest results and news on African football, fans can check out the website of the Confédération Africaine de Football (CAF; [www.cafonline.com](http://www.cafonline.com)), Africa's football governing body.



## THE DAKAR RALLY

The Dakar Motor Rally, also known simply as 'Le Dakar', is considered to be one of the world's longest, hardest and most dangerous driving events. It was the brainchild of French racing driver Thierry Sabine and was first held in 1979, although adventurous motorists have been crossing the Sahara since the 1920s. The race is held annually in January, usually starting in Paris (in recent years it has begun in Barcelona and Lisbon) and finishing in Dakar. The race always crosses the Sahara Desert, although the route changes every year. The route distance is around 10,000km and takes about 20 days to complete.

The pace, heat and terrain are so tough that of the 400 or so vehicles that start each year, less than half (and sometimes only around a quarter) cross the finish line. Categories include motorbikes, cars and trucks, and international auto manufacturers such as Citroën and Yamaha spend millions of dollars on drivers, machines and support teams to ensure top rankings. Of equal interest are the 'privateers' – individuals or amateur teams who compete on shoestring budgets and keep the spirit of the original adventurers alive.

Some commentators have questioned the morality of a million-dollar orgy of Western consumerism blasting its way through the poverty-stricken Sahel. The sponsorship money the rally generates, for example, equals 50% of Mauritania's total aid budget and each rally stage burns 10% of Mali's total annual fuel consumption. In fact, so much petrol is needed by the competitors that 'host' countries run short and some aid and relief operations report being unable to move their trucks for weeks. Competitors get killed most years, but when innocent villagers (who account for 75% of the overall numbers of deaths) get run over by speeding cars with a value many times the lifetime earnings of an entire town, the contrast is brought even more sharply into focus.

The organisers of the race have begun to react to criticism by teaming up with French aid agency SOS Sahel. Since the partnership began in September 2002, the majority of the Dakar's donations have gone towards environmental protection (eg waste management, tree planting and education) and projects providing safe drinking water in Senegal, Mali, Mauritania and Burkina Faso.

An offbeat and thoroughly worthwhile alternative is the Plymouth–Banjul Challenge, which often runs at the same time as its more illustrious counterpart. To enter, competing cars must cost less than UK£100, the maximum budget for preparation is UK£15 and all vehicles that reach Banjul (or Dakar) must be handed over to the race organisers who auction them off to support Gambian and Senegalese charities.

But it was at the 1990 World Cup in Italy that West Africa finally emerged as a football powerhouse on the world stage. Cameroon stunned the world by defeating the reigning champions Argentina in the opening match of the tournament and went on to become the first African team to reach the quarter finals. Senegal also defeated the defending champions France in 2002 and reached the quarter finals and Cameroon won the football gold medal at the 2000 Sydney Olympics. Although Cameroon, Nigeria and Senegal have been the major players in recent years, all three dramatically failed to qualify for the 2006 World Cup, where West Africa will be represented by Ghana, Togo and Côte d'Ivoire.

All West African countries have football leagues and tournaments in which teams from different towns and cities compete on a national or regional basis. The winners of local league and cup competitions qualify for continent-wide club competitions, which include the African Champions League and the Confédération Africaine de Football (CAF) Cup, both held annually.

## RELIGION

Generally speaking, roughly half of all West Africans are Muslim, particularly those living in the desert and Sahel countries. Although you'll also find Christians living in some of the larger cities of the Sahel,

The Dakar Motor Rally website ([www.dakar.com](http://www.dakar.com)) has everything you need to know about the world's most famous desert rally. The website of the Plymouth–Banjul Challenge ([www.plymouth-dakar.co.uk](http://www.plymouth-dakar.co.uk)) doesn't take itself quite as seriously.

Christianity is more widespread in the southern coastal countries. For information on the religious make-up of individual countries, see the relevant country chapters.

## Traditional Beliefs

Before the arrival of Islam and Christianity, every race, tribe or clan in West Africa practised its own traditional religion. While many people in the Sahel converted to Islam, and those in the south converted to Christianity, traditional religions remained strong in many parts of the region and still retain a powerful hold over the consciousness of West Africans, even co-existing with established aspects of Islam or Christianity; firm lines between one set of values and another can often be difficult to draw. When discussing traditional beliefs, terms such as 'juju', 'voodoo' and 'witchcraft' are frequently employed. In certain specific contexts these may be correct, but they cannot be applied to all traditional African religions. For more information on some of these terms, see p93.

There are hundreds of traditional religions in West Africa, with considerable areas of overlap, but there are no great temples (more modest local shrines often served the same purpose) or written scriptures (in keeping with West Africa's largely oral tradition). Beliefs and traditions can be complex and difficult to understand, but several common factors can be outlined. The description here provides an overview only, and is necessarily very simplified.

Almost all traditional religions are animist, meaning that they are based on the attribution of life or consciousness to natural objects or phenomena. Thus a certain tree, mountain, river or stone may be sacred because it represents, is home to, or simply *is* a spirit or deity. The number of deities of each religion varies, as does the phenomena that represents them. The Ewe of Togo and Ghana, for example, have more than 600 deities, including one that represents the disease smallpox.

Several traditional religions accept the existence of a supreme being or creator, as well as the spirits and deities, although this figure usually figures in creation myths and is considered too exalted to be concerned with humans. Communication is possible only through the lesser deities or through the intercession of ancestors. Thus, in many African religions, ancestors play a particularly strong role. Their principal function is to protect the tribe or family and they may on occasion show their ancestral pleasure or displeasure (eg in the form of bad weather or a bad harvest, or when a living member of the family becomes sick). Many traditional religions hold that the ancestors are the real owners of the land, and while it can be enjoyed and used during the lifetime of their descendants, it cannot be sold.

Communication with ancestors or deities may take the form of prayer, offerings (possibly with the assistance of a holy man, or occasionally a holy woman) or sacrifice. Requests may include good health, bountiful harvests and numerous children. Many village celebrations are held to ask for help from, or in honour of, ancestors and deities. The Dogon people from the Bandiagara Escarpment in Mali, for instance, have celebrations before planting (to ensure good crops) and after harvest (to give thanks). Totems, fetishes (talismans) and charms are also important features of traditional religions; for more details, see p70.

## Islam

### ISLAM & WEST AFRICA

Between AD 610 and 620 in the city of Mecca, Saudi Arabia, the Prophet Mohammed, after a series of revelations from Allah, called on the people

*The Encyclopedia of African and African-American Religions*, edited by Stephen Glazier, is encyclopaedic in scope and certainly the best resource on Africa's traditional religions.

*Egypt*, by Youssou N'Dour, Senegal's most famous international star, pays musical tribute to Senegal's rich and tolerant Sufi tradition, which blends perfectly with the sounds of Egyptian orchestral arrangements.

*Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet*, by Karen Armstrong, is a sensitive, well-researched and highly readable biography of the Prophet Mohammed set against the backdrop of modern misconceptions and stereotypes about Islam.

to turn away from pagan worship and submit to Allah, the one true god. His teachings appealed to poorer levels of society and angered the wealthy merchant class. In AD 622 Mohammed and his followers were forced to flee to Medina. This migration, the Hejira, marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar, year 1 AH (anno Hegirae). By AD 630 (8 AH), Mohammed had gained a larger following and returned to Mecca.

Mohammed died in AD 632, but within two decades most of Arabia was converted to Islam. Over the following centuries, Islam spread through North and West Africa and down the coast of East Africa. En route to West Africa, Islam adapted to local conditions by evolving features that would not be recognised by purists in Cairo or Mecca. Most notable of these are the marabouts – holy men who act as a cross between priest, doctor and adviser for local people. In some countries, especially Senegal, marabouts wield considerable political power.

Islam spread so quickly partly because it provided a simpler alternative to the established faiths, which had become complicated by hierarchical orders, sects and complex rituals, offering instead a direct relationship with God based only on the believer's submission to God ('Islam' means submission). Sufism, which emphasises mystical and spiritual attributes, was one of the more popular Islamic forms in West Africa; some scholars speculate that the importance that Sufis ascribe to religious teachers may have found favour in West Africa as it mirrored existing hierarchical social structures.

For more information on the history of Islam in West Africa, see p35.

#### THE FIVE PILLARS OF ISLAM

The five pillars of Islam (the basic tenets that guide Muslims in their daily lives) are as follows:

**shahada** (the profession of faith) 'There is no god but Allah, and Mohammed is his Prophet' is the fundamental tenet of Islam.

**salat** (prayer) Muslims must face Mecca and pray at dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset and nightfall. Prayer times are marked by the haunting call to prayer, which emanates from mosques and rings out across the towns and villages of the Sahel.

**zakat** (alms) Muslims must give a portion of their income to the poor and needy.

**sawm** (fasting) Ramadan commemorates Mohammed's first revelation, and is the month when all Muslims fast from dawn to dusk.

**haj** (pilgrimage, usually written hadj in West Africa) Every Muslim capable of affording it should perform the haj, or pilgrimage, to the holiest of cities, Mecca, at least once in his or her lifetime. The reward is considerable: the forgiving of all past sins. This can involve a lifetime of saving money, and it's not unusual for families to save up and send one member. Before the advent of air travel, the pilgrimage often involved an overland journey of a year or more. In West Africa, those who complete the pilgrimage receive the honorific title of Hadj for men, and Hadjia for women. If you meet someone with this prefix, you may appreciate the honour this bestows on them in the community.

For information on Islamic holidays, including a table of dates, see p818.

#### ISLAMIC CUSTOMS

In everyday life, Muslims are prohibited from drinking alcohol and eating carrion, blood products or pork, which are considered unclean, the meat of animals not killed in the prescribed manner and food over which the name of Allah has not been said. Adultery, theft and gambling are also prohibited.

Islam is not just about prohibitions but also marks the important events of a Muslim's life. When a baby is born, the first words uttered to it

*Islam: A Short History*, by Karen Armstrong, is a first-rate primer on the world's fastest-growing religion; it's distinguished by a fair-minded approach and language that makes it all sound so clear.

#### TIPS FOR THE TRAVELLER IN ISLAMIC AREAS

When you visit a mosque, take off your shoes; women should cover their heads and shoulders with scarves. In some mosques, women are not allowed to enter if prayers are in progress or if the imam (prayer leader) is present; in others, there may be separate entrances for men and women. In others still, non-Muslims are not allowed to enter at all.

If you've hired a guide or taxi driver for the day, remember that he'll want to say his prayers at the right times, so look out for signs that he wants a few moments off, particularly around noon, late afternoon and sunset. Travellers on buses and bush taxis should also be prepared for prayer stops at these times.

Despite the Islamic proscription against alcohol, some Muslims may enjoy a quiet drink. Even so, it's impolite to drink alcohol in their presence unless they show approval.

During Islamic holidays, shops and offices may close. Even if the offices are officially open, during the Ramadan period of fasting, people become soporific (especially when Ramadan falls in the hot season) and very little gets done.

are, in many places, the call to prayer. A week later follows a ceremony in which the baby's head is shaved and an animal sacrificed in remembrance of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son to Allah. The major event of a boy's childhood is circumcision, which normally takes place between the ages of seven and 12. When a person dies, a burial service is held at the mosque and the body is buried with the feet facing Mecca.

#### ARTS

West Africa has a rich artistic heritage that extends from arts and handicrafts (see p67) and music (p58) to literature, architecture and a thriving film industry.

#### Literature

African society has long revolved around storytelling, which took either oral or musical form. The greatest and most famous tale is the Epic of Sundiata (see p33), the story of the founder of the Empire of Mali and whose story is still recounted by modern griots, musicians and writers.

Modern-day West African writers have adapted this tradition, weaving compelling tales into the great issues facing modern West Africa, most notably the arrival and legacy of colonial powers and the role of women within traditional society. For a good introduction to the literature of the region, the most useful anthology is the *Traveller's Literary Companion – Africa*, edited by Oona Strathern, which contains more than 250 prose and poetry extracts from all over Africa, an introduction to the literature of each country, author biographies and a list of 'literary landmarks' (features that appear in novels written about the country). Poetry anthologies include *The Heinemann Book of African Poetry in English*, edited by Adewale Maja-Pearce, and *The Penguin Book of Modern African Poetry*, edited by Moore and Beier.

Listed here is a brief selection of classic works by African authors of international renown. All are highly recommended and many are published as part of the Heinemann African Writers series. For more titles by regional authors see the individual country chapters.

#### NIGERIA

Nigeria has a particularly strong literary tradition and is largely credited with producing the first African novels of international quality. Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drunkard* was published in the early 1950s

The Epic of Sundiata is at its most accessible in *Sunjata: Gambian Versions of the Mande Epic*, by Bamba Suso and Banna Kanute, which retells West Africa's most famous story as told in the tradition of Gambian griots.

and brought African writers to the world's attention by providing a link between traditional storytelling and the modern novel. Dylan Thomas, poet and critic, described it as 'brief, thonged, grisly and bewitching'. It's about an insatiable drunkard who seeks his palm-wine tapster in the world of the dead.

Chinua Achebe is even better known and his *Things Fall Apart* (1958) is a classic; it has sold over eight million copies in 30 languages, more than any other African work. Set in the mid-19th century, this novel studies the collision between pre-colonial Ibo society and European missionaries. Achebe's more recent work, *Anthills of the Savannah*, is a satirical study of political disorder and corruption. It was a finalist for the 1987 Booker Prize.

Taking the art form to new heights, Wole Soyinka won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986 (the first author from Africa to achieve this accolade) for his impressive body of work, which includes the plays *A Dance of the Forest*, *The Man Died*, *Opera Wonyosi* and *A Play of Giants*. He has also written poetry (including *Idane & Other Poems*), novels (including *The Interpreters*), political essays and the fantastical childhood memoir *Ake*. Soyinka's works are noted as expressions of his social vision and strong beliefs, and are praised for their complex writing style.

Another Nigerian author is the exceptionally talented Ben Okri, whose novel *The Famished Road* won the Booker Prize in 1991. When critics grumbled that to appreciate the book's style and symbolism the reader had to 'understand Africa', Okri recalled reading Victorian novelists such as Dickens as a schoolboy in Nigeria. He continues to fuse modern style with traditional mythological themes in his later novels *Songs of Enchantment*, *Dangerous Love*, *Infinite Riches* and *Astonishing the Gods*.

Buchi Emecheta is one of Africa's most successful female authors. Her novels include *Slave Girl*, *The Joys of Motherhood*, *Rape of Shavi* and *Ke-hinde*, and focus with humour and irrepressible irony on the struggles of African women to overcome their second-class treatment by society.

A particularly exciting collection of Nigerian writers has emerged in the last few years to build on the successes of the earlier generation. Those who have received glowing critical acclaim include Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (*Purple Hibiscus*), Helen Oyeyemi (*The Icarus Girl*), Uzodinma Iweala (*Beasts of No Nation*) and Helon Habila (*Waiting for an Angel*), each of which vividly portrays modern Nigeria in all its vigour and complexity.

## ELSEWHERE IN WEST AFRICA

The strength of the West African oral tradition is such that the phrase, 'the death of an old man is like the burning down of a library' is now known across the world. What few people know is that it was first penned by Mali's greatest writer, Amadou Hampaté Bâ, who was, until his death in 1991, one of the most significant figures in West African literature, as well as a leading linguist, ethnographer and religious scholar. Bâ wrote prolifically, although only three of his books are readily available in English – *The Fortunes of Wangrin* (which won the 1976 'Grand Prix littéraire de l'Afrique noire'); *Kaidara* and *Radiance of the Great Star*. His critically acclaimed autobiography, *Amkoullel, l'enfant peul*, has yet to be translated into English.

Sembène Ousmane, from Senegal, is better known as an acclaimed movie director (see p679), but he has also published short story collections and *God's Bits of Wood*, an accomplished novel set in colonial Mali and Senegal. It's one of the few Francophone novels that is well known

and readily available in English. Another Senegalese writer is Mariama Bâ, whose novel *So Long a Letter* won the Noma Award for publishing in Africa. The late Leopold Senghor, former Senegalese president and a literary figure of international note, is the author of several collections of poetry and writings. For more information on Senegalese writers, see p679. Of the next generation of Senegalese women writers, Nafissatou Dia Diouf is attracting attention. Her work includes *Retour d'un long exil et autres nouvelles* (2001) and *Sables Mouvants* (2000), although she's still new on the African literary scene, ensuring that her novels are yet to be translated from the French.

Côte d'Ivoire's finest novelist, Ahmadou Kourouma, is widely available in English. His *Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote* is a masterpiece that evocatively captures both the transition to colonial rule and the subsequent corruption of power by Africa's leaders. *The Suns of Independence*, *Monwew* and *Allah Doesn't Have To* are also great reads.

Cameroon's best-known literary figure is the late Mongo Beti. *The Poor Christ of Bomba* is Beti's cynical recounting of the failure of a missionary to convert the people of a small village. Other works by Beti include *Mission to Kala* and *Remember Ruben*.

Ghana's foremost writer is Ayi Kwei Armah. His *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1969) is a classic tale of corruption and disillusionment in post-independence Africa and undoubtedly the best in a fine body of work. Ama Ata Aidoo, one of Ghana's few well-known female writers, wrote *Changes: A Love Story*, a contemporary novel about a modern Ghanaian woman's life in Accra. Her other books, *Our Sister Killjoy* and *Dilemma of a Ghost and Anowa*, are also excellent. Kojo Laing (*Woman of the Aeroplanes*, *Search Sweet Country*, *Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars* and *Godhorse*) is another Ghanaian novelist of modest international renown.

Other acclaimed writers include Gambia's William Conton, whose 1960s classic *The African* is a semiautobiographical tale of an African student in Britain who later returns to his homeland and becomes president, and Camara Laye (Guinea), who wrote *The African Child* (also called *The Dark Child*), which was first published in 1954 and is one of the most widely printed works by an African.

## Cinema & TV

West African music (p58) may be making a lot of noise in international circles, but the region's film industry has for decades been quietly gathering plaudits from critics. Where major non-Western movie industries elsewhere (eg India and Egypt) have captured attention for the volume of their output and their song-and-dance, cops-and-robbers populism, West African film is high quality and a regular presence at the world's best film festivals. West Africa also has one such festival of its own – Fespaco (see p133) – which takes place biannually in Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso and has placed quality film-making at the centre of modern West African cultural life.

A small but significant West African film industry has existed in the region since the heady post-independence days of the 1960s. At that time, some countries in the region nurtured cultural links with the Soviet Union, and several directors trained in Moscow, returning home to make films – often with state support or funding – based on overtly Marxist themes.

Common themes explored by the first wave of postcolonial film makers included the exploitation of the masses by colonialists and, later,

*Magical Realism in West African Literature: Seeing with a Third Eye*, by Brenda Cooper, is a tad academic but is essential for those eager to learn more about West African literature in the wider literary context; it's especially good on Ben Okri and Kojo Laing.

*West African Folktales*, which is edited by Steven H Gale, is a good introduction to the myths and stories of West Africa, many of which form the underpinning of the region's modern literary forms.

A particularly incisive account of the clash between modern and traditional views on polygamy is given in *So Long a Letter*, an especially fine novel written in the voice of a widow by Senegalese author Mariama Bâ.

California Newsreel ([www.newsreel.org](http://www.newsreel.org)) is a resource on African film with extensive reviews and a Library of African Cinema, where you can order many of the best West African films, especially those that have won at Fespaco.



corrupt and inefficient independent governments. Another theme was the clash between tradition and modernity. Films frequently portrayed African values – usually in a rural setting – suffering from Western cultural influence.

The 1970s was the zenith of African film making, and many films from this era still inspire the new generation of directors working today. However, through the 1980s and 1990s and into the 21st century, directors have found it increasingly difficult to find the necessary finance, production facilities and – most crucially – distribution that would give West African directors the wider recognition they deserve. The lack of a good distribution network for African films also makes it difficult for travellers to see them, even though most of the continent's directors (outside South Africa) are from West Africa, particularly the Francophone countries.

West African film is dominated by three countries: Senegal, Mali and Burkina Faso. For a list of West Africa's finest movies, see p21.

Ousmane Sembène from Senegal is arguably West Africa's best-known director. His body of work includes *Borom Sarret* (1963), the first commercial film to be made in post-independence Africa, *Xala*, *Camp Thiaroye* and, most recently, the critically acclaimed *Moolade*, which tackles the taboo subject of female genital mutilation. Other important Senegalese directors include Ahmed Diallo, Mansour Wade, Amadou Seck and Djibril Diop. For more information on Senegalese films, see p679.

Mali's leading director is Souleymane Cissé, whose 1970s films include *Baara* and *Cinq Jours d'Une Vie*. Later films include the wonderful

*Butabur: Adobe Architecture of West Africa*, by James Morris, is a stunning photographic study of West Africa's traditional architecture with informative text; a great reminder of your visit.

### THE BEST OF WEST AFRICAN ARCHITECTURE

West Africa is more known as a destination where people, cultures and landscapes provide the major attractions. However, there are some stunning examples of architecture dotted around the region.

The king of traditional mosques is the extraordinary Djenné Mosque (Mali; p506) with its forest of turrets and mud flourishes. Other especially fine traditional mosques include the Grande Mosquée of Bobo-Dioulasso (Burkina Faso; p150), the seven mosques of Bani (Burkina Faso; p163), the Dyingerey Ber Mosque and Sankore Mosque in Timbuktu (Mali, p522) and the Grande Mosquée of Agadez (Niger; p606), all of which are built, at least in part, of mud, straw and wood with pyramidal minarets.

The villages of the Dogon Country (Mali; p489) huddle up against the cliffs of the Bandiagara escarpment, while the fortified villages of the Tamberma Valley (Togo; p799) in northern Togo are similarly otherworldly. Elsewhere, the villages of southern Burkina Faso, especially the multi-storey, fortresslike family compounds of the Lobi (Burkina Faso; p158) and the geometrically painted windowless homes of the Gourounsi in Tiébélé (Burkina Faso; p160), are definitely worth the effort to get there. The same could be said of the old quarters of the Saharan oasis towns of Ouadâne (Mauritania; p567), Chinguetti (Mauritania; p565), Tichit (Mauritania; p569) and Oualâta (Mauritania; p570). Timbuktu (Mali; p521), Agadez (Mali; p604) and Djenné (Mali; p504) also have evocative, if crumbling, old towns built entirely of mud. The traditional mud-and-thatch homes in the area around Bamenda (Cameroon; p198) are also some of the finest in the region.

Cameroon is particularly rich in traditional palaces, especially at Foumban (Cameroon; p203) and Bafut (Cameroon; p201), while Abomey (Benin; p110) also boasts a fine royal palace. Africa's only stilt villages (Benin; p102) are not far away at Ganvié. In Ghana, there are also traditional Ashanti buildings (Kumasi, Ghana; p378) and fine, if blood-stained colonial forts (Ghana; p354) all along the coast.

For elegant colonial-era buildings, the Portuguese left their mark throughout Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde; in the latter Cidade Velha (Cape Verde; p238) is undoubtedly home to the richest collection.

*Yeelen*, a prize-winner at the 1987 Cannes festival, and *Waati*. Cheick Omar Sissoko has won prizes at Cannes and his *Guimba, un Tyran, une Époque Guimba*, won the Étalon d'Or de Yennega, Africa's 'Oscar', at the 1995 Fespaco. Other highly regarded Malian film makers include Assane Kouyaté, Adama Drabo, Falaba Issa Traoré and Abdoulaye Ascofaré. For more information on Malian films, see p489.

From Burkina Faso, Idrissa Ouédraogo, who won the 1990 Grand Prix at Cannes for *Tilä*, is one of very few West African film-makers to find genuine commercial success in the West. His other movies include *Yaaba*, *Samba Traoré*, *Kini* and *Adams*. Gaston Kaboré is another fine director whose film *Buud Yam* was the 1997 winner of the Étalon d'Or de Yennega. Other Burkinabé directors include Djim Mamadou Kola, Dany Kouyate and Daniel Kollo Sanou. For more information on films from Burkina Faso, see p132.

Television in West Africa is pretty dire, dominated as it is by government-run channels and poorly resourced production. In most countries of the region. Its saving grace may be the music performances by amateur local musicians or local drama serials that are folksy rather than high quality. Satellite news channels from France, England and the US are sometimes available in top hotels.

### FOOD & DRINK

Although poverty means that food in West Africa is often monotonous and is a functional rather than enjoyable feature of life for ordinary West Africans, the combination of influences – including local, French and even Lebanese – has resulted in some delicious cuisine. The key is knowing where to find it (you won't find much variety outside larger cities), trying not to let the rather generous amounts of oil used in cooking bother you and learning to appreciate the atmosphere – an essential ingredient in the region's cooking – as much as the food. The quality of food tends to vary considerably from country to country. Culinary highlights of the region include Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal and Cameroon, although you'll find tasty dishes in many other places as well. In desert countries such as Mauritania or Niger, ingredients are limited. In general, the countries with the best range of food tend to be those along the coast, where rainfall is plentiful and the crops are varied.

### Staples & Specialties

Rice, rice and more rice is the West African staple that you'll encounter most on your travels. Millet is also common, although this grain is usually pounded into flour before it's cooked. The millet flour is steamed and then moistened with water until it thickens into a stiff porridge that can be eaten with the fingers. Sorghum is a similar grain crop, although it's not used as much as millet. In the Sahel, couscous (semolina or millet grains) is always on the menu.

In the countries nearer the coast, staples may be root crops such as yam or cassava (also called manioc), which are pounded or grated before being cooked. They're served as a near-solid glob, called *fufu* or *foufou* (which morphs into *foutou* further north) – kind of like mashed potatoes mixed with gelatine and very sticky. You grab a portion (with your right hand) form a ball, dip it in the sauce and enjoy. In the coastal countries, plantain (green banana) is also common – either fried like French fries, cooked solid or pounded into a *fufu*.

If you don't find much variety in terms of rice and other grains or roots, that's because the secret's in the sauce. The combination is most

Fespaco ([www.fespaco.bf](http://www.fespaco.bf)) is an English- and French-language site that has comprehensive information about Africa's premier film festival, including past winners and upcoming events. It's updated daily during the festival.

*"My Cooking" West-African Cookbook*, by Dokpe L Ogunsanya, is an exuberantly presented cookbook that's ideal for researching before you go to get an idea of what to look for.



## KOLA NUTS

Kola nuts are yellow or purple nuts, about half the size of a golf ball, which are sold in streets and markets everywhere in West Africa and are known for their mildly hallucinogenic effects. West Africans traditionally give kola nuts as gifts, and they're also a good option for travellers to carry and give to people in exchange for their kindness (or if you want to endear yourself to your fellow passengers in a bush taxi). The nuts last longer if you keep them moist but will become mouldy in a day or two if kept in a plastic bag. Despite the nuts' popularity among West Africans, most foreigners find them too bitter to chew and anyone looking for a high is usually disappointed.

*South of the Sahara: Traditional Cooking from the Lands of West Africa*, by Elizabeth A Jackson, brings the flavours of West Africa to your kitchen; the writer lived for a time in Africa and loves her food.

often called *riz sauce*. In some Sahel countries, groundnuts (peanuts) are common, and a thick brown groundnut sauce (usually called a variation of *arachide*) is often served, either on its own or with meat or vegetables mixed in with the nuts. When groundnut sauce is used in a stew, it's called *domodah* or *mafé*. Sometimes deep-orange palm oil is also added. Sauces are also made with vegetables or the leaves of staple food plants such as cassava.

Okra is popular, particularly in coastal countries – the result is a slimy green concoction that tastes a whole lot better than it looks. Other vegetables used in meals include *pommes de terre* (potatoes), *patates* (sweet potatoes), *oignons* (onions), *haricots verte* (green beans) and *tomates* (tomatoes). For flavouring, chillis may be used, or *jaxatu* (ja-ka-too) – similar to a green or yellow tomato but extremely bitter.

Some of the enduring favourites can be found throughout the region but are specialties from particular countries. These include: the ubiquitous *jollof rice* (rice and vegetables with meat or fish and called '*riz yollof*' in Francophone countries); *kedjenou* (Côte d'Ivoire's national dish of slowly simmered chicken or fish with peppers and tomatoes); *poulet yassa* (a Senegalese dish consisting of grilled chicken in an onion and lemon sauce); you'll also come across *poisson yassa* (fish), *viande yassa* (meat) and just *yassa*; and *tiéboudienne* (Senegal's national dish of rice baked in a thick sauce of fish and vegetables).

Stock cubes or sachets of flavouring are ubiquitous across the region (Maggi is the most common trade name) and are often thrown into the pot as well. Where it can be afforded, or on special occasions, meat or fish is added to the sauce; sometimes succulent slices, sometimes grimly unattractive heads, tails and bones.

The availability of fruit depends on the season, but choice is always good and increases as you head south from the Sahel into the coastal countries. Fruits you're likely to see include oranges, mandarins and grapefruits (all often with green skin despite being ready to eat), bananas (many different colours and sizes), mangoes (also many varieties), papayas, pineapples, guavas and passionfruit.

See individual country chapters for more details on regional specialties, while for other dishes you'll come frequently come across, see opposite.

## Drinks

### NONALCOHOLIC DRINKS

International and local brands of soft drinks are sold virtually everywhere. A tiny shop in a remote village may sell little food, but chances are they'll have a few dusty bottles of Coca-Cola or Pepsi for sale. (Coke is called 'Coca' in Francophone countries.) Bottled mineral water is widely available in cities, towns and tourist areas.

*Troth Wells' New Internationalist Food Book* is more than just a recipe book – it tells vignettes from a whole host of countries and puts food at the heart of the Africans' daily struggle for survival.

Home-made soft drinks include ginger beer and *bissap*, a purple mixure made from water and hibiscus leaves. These drinks are usually sold in plastic bags by children on the street. Although they are refreshing, the water may not be clean, so they're usually best avoided.

In the Sahel countries, tea comes in two sorts. There's the type made with a tea bag (its local name is 'Lipton tea' even if the brand is actually something else), and there's the type of tea drunk by the local population – made with green leaves (often imported from China) and served with loads of sugar in small glasses. Mint is sometimes added, or the tea may be made from mint leaves alone. Half the fun of drinking local-style tea is the ritual that goes with it, taking at least an hour. Traditionally, the tea is brewed three times and poured from a small pot high above the glass.

Coffee is almost exclusively instant coffee (Nescafé is the usual brand). At street-side coffee stalls it's mixed with sweetened condensed milk, and in some areas the water may be infused with a local leaf called *kinkiliba*, which gives it a woody tang – unusual but not unpleasant once you get over the shock.

### ALCOHOLIC DRINKS

You can sometimes find imported beers from Europe and the USA, but about 45 brands of beer are brewed in West Africa, with Nigeria alone producing about 30. Some beers are European brands, brewed locally, others are specific to the region. The quality is often very good. Brands to look out for include: Club (Ghana, Nigeria and Liberia), Flag (Côte d'Ivoire, Mali and Senegal), Star (Sierra Leone, Ghana and Nigeria), Harp and Guldner (Nigeria and Ghana). Guinness is found in several countries, too.

In the Sahel a rough, brown and gritty beer made from millet (called *chakalow* or *kojo*) is common, but West Africa's most-popular brew is palm wine. The tree is tapped and the sap comes out mildly fermented. Sometimes yeast is added and the brew is allowed to ferment overnight, which makes it much stronger. In Nigeria, it's even bottled in factories.

### Celebrations

Ceremonies are very important in traditional societies, as they reinforce social structures, connect people to their traditions, mark important rites of passage (baptisms or naming ceremonies, circumcisions, weddings and funerals) and generally provide an excuse for a big feed. Most of these family or village ceremonies involve gifts and, invariably once the formal rituals are completed, a meal of slaughtered sheep or goat.

Some travellers have been lucky enough to stay with local people, where a great way to repay their hospitality is to pay for a special meal for the entire family. This way you'll also be able to see how meals are put together. For the full picture, visit the market with the lady of the house (it's always the women who do the cooking in domestic situations) and see the various ingredients being bought.

### Where to Eat & Drink

The best place to eat, if you're lucky enough to be invited, is at somebody's house. Most days, though, you'll be heading for a restaurant or eating on the street.

### STREET FOOD

Street food is ideal if you're on the move, trying to save money or if you prefer to eat little but often. It tends to be absurdly cheap and is often delicious – especially the grilled fish.

The Africa Guide's cooking webpage ([www.africa-guide.com/cooking.htm](http://www.africa-guide.com/cooking.htm)) is not as detailed as most cookbooks but it's good on basic ingredients and does have some tasty recipes.

Betumi ([www.betumi.com](http://www.betumi.com)) is dedicated to traditional and contemporary cuisine, where a useful feature is the online forum where people write in with ideas and places to track down ingredients; it's especially helpful for American readers.

### MINDING YOUR MANNERS

If you're invited to share a meal with locals, there are a few customs to observe. You'll probably sit with your hosts on the floor and it's usually polite to take off your shoes. It may be impolite, however, to show the soles of your feet, so make sure you observe what your hosts do.

The food is served in one or two large dishes, and is normally eaten by hand. Beginners will just pick out manageable portions with their fingers, but experts dig deep, forming a ball of rice and sauce with the fingers. Everybody washes their hands before and after eating. As an honoured guest you might be passed choice morsels by your hosts, and it's usually polite to finish eating while there's still food in the bowl to show you've had enough.

While eating with your hand is a bit of an art and takes some practice, it should soon start to feel natural. At the outset, you probably won't offend anybody by asking for a spoon. The most important thing, however you eat, is to use only the right hand (as the left hand is traditionally used for more personal, less delicious, matters).

On street corners and around bus stations, especially in the morning, you'll see small booths selling pieces of bread with fillings or toppings of butter, chocolate spread, yogurt, mayonnaise or sardines. In the Francophone countries, the bread is cut from fresh French-style loaves or baguettes, but in the Anglophone countries the bread is often a less-enticing soft, white loaf. Price depends on the size of the piece of bread you want, and the type of filling.

One of the region's finest institutions (found mainly in the French-speaking countries) are the coffee stalls where clients sit on small benches around a table and drink glasses of Nescafé mixed with sweetened condensed milk, served with French-style bread, butter or mayonnaise – all for around US\$0.50. Some also offer Lipton tea or even Milo, while more enterprising stallholders fry up eggs or serve sardines. Many coffee stalls are only open in the morning.

In the Sahel countries, usually around markets, you'll see women with large bowls covered with a wicker lid selling yogurt, often mixed with pounded millet and sugar. This sells for around US\$0.15 a portion – you can eat it on the spot, or take it away in a plastic bag.

In the evenings you can buy brochettes (small pieces of beef, sheep or goat meat skewered and grilled over a fire) or lumps of roast meat sold by guys who walk around pushing a tin oven on wheels. Around markets and bus stations, women serve deep-fried chips of cassava or some other root crop.

In Francophone countries, grilled and roast meat, usually mixed with onions and spices, is sold in shacks (basically an oven with a few walls around it). These are called *dibieteries* in some places, and you can eat on the spot (a rough bench might be provided) or take away. To feed one or two, ask for about CFA1000 worth (about US\$2).

Another popular stand-by in the larger cities are Lebanese-style shwarmas, thin slices of lamb grilled on a spit, served with salad (optional) in Lebanese-style bread (pita) with a sauce made from chickpeas. These cost about US\$1.

### SIT-DOWN MEALS

West Africa abounds with restaurants – from fine and varied cuisine in capital cities to one-wooden-bench tin shacks in smaller towns. The smallest, most simple eating houses usually have just one or two meals available each day and if you spend most of your time eating in these places, your meals will be pretty straightforward – bowls of rice or an-

other staple served with a simple sauce. For information on the art of eating in a *maquis* (open-air restaurant), see p264.

In slightly smarter places your choice may also include fried chicken or fish served with *frites* (hot chips). Cooked vegetables, such as green beans, may also be available. Up a grade from here, mainly in cities, you'll find midrange restaurants catering to well-off locals and foreigners. They may serve only 'international' dishes such as steaks or pizzas (although some also do African dishes), and these meals are usually expensive, particularly if some of the ingredients have been imported from Europe. Ironically, local specialities, such as fish and rice, may cost the same in this kind of place.

### Vegetarians & Vegans

Being a vegetarian in West Africa is challenging, though possible, and decidedly unexciting when it comes to choice – you'll end up eating the same things again and again. Indeed, the concept of vegetarianism is rarely understood in West Africa, and vegetarian restaurants are rare. Your best bet is often Asian or (less common) Indian restaurants in capital cities, which always have some vegetarian dishes. The main challenge is likely to be keeping some variety and nutritional balance in your diet, and getting enough protein, especially if you don't eat eggs and dairy products.

If you do eat eggs and dairy products, pizzas and omelettes make a change from the ubiquitous bean-and-vegetable dishes. The French may have bequeathed a love of coffee and good bread to its former colonies, but cheese never quite caught on. Expensive imported cheese is usually available in capital cities. Otherwise, cheese is seldom available except for the ultra-processed triangular varieties, which are often sold in larger supermarkets.

Vegetarian street food possibilities include cassava, yam and plantain chips, bread with mayonnaise, egg or chocolate spread, and fried dough balls. Alternatively, head for the markets and do your own catering. There is always plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables (usually sold in piles of four or five pieces), as well as bread and tins of margarine or tomato paste. Banana and groundnut (local-style peanut butter) sandwiches made with fresh bread are a nutritious option, while it's sometimes possible to find take-away spaghetti and tomato sauce served in banana leaves.

Keep in mind that even the most simple vegetable sauce may sometimes have a small bit of meat or animal fat in it, and chicken or fish are usually not regarded as 'real' meat. The ubiquitous Maggi cubes also often contain chicken. Another factor to consider if you're invited to someone's home for dinner is the fact that meat – a luxury for most local residents – is often reserved for special occasions or honoured guests (such as yourself). This means that the beast in the cooking pot bubbling away on the fire may well have been slaughtered in your honour, so give some thought as to how you might deal with this situation in advance.

### Food & Drink Glossary

<i>afra</i>	grilled meat, or grilled-meat stall
<i>agouti</i>	a rodent of the porcupine family, known as grasscutter or cane rat in Anglophone countries; it's popular in stews
<i>aloco</i>	fried bananas or plantains with onions and chilli
<i>attiéké</i>	grated cassava
<i>benchi</i>	black bench peas with palm oil and fish
<i>bissap</i>	purple drink made from water and hibiscus leaves
<i>brochette</i>	cubes of meat or fish grilled on a stick

*Cooking the West African Way*, by Bertha Vining Montgomery and Constance Nabwire, is another fine cookbook and one of only a handful that dedicates itself solely to West Africa.

*Spices of Life: Piquant Recipes from Africa, Asia and Latin America for Western Kitchens*, by Troth Wells, has recipes, social and cultural information and some fascinating ideas for your next dinner party.

<i>buvette</i>	small bar or drinks stall
<i>caféman</i>	man serving coffee (usually Nescafé), sometimes tea, and French bread with various fillings; found in Francophone countries mainly, usually only in the morning
<i>capitaine</i>	Nile perch (fish)
<i>carte</i>	menu
<i>cassava</i>	a common starch staple eaten as an accompaniment; the leaves are eaten as a green vegetable; also called <i>gari</i> or manioc
<i>chakalaw</i>	millet beer
<i>chop</i>	meal, usually local style
<i>chop shop</i>	a basic local-style eating house or restaurant (English-speaking countries); also called a rice bar
<i>cocoyam</i>	starch-yielding food plant, also called taro
<i>couscous</i>	semolina or millet grains, served as an accompaniment to sauce
<i>dibieterie</i>	grilled-meat stall
<i>domodah</i>	groundnut-based stew with meat or vegetables
<i>épinard</i>	spinach
<i>felafel</i>	Lebanese-style deep-fried balls of ground chickpeas and herbs, often served with chickpea paste in sandwiches
<i>feuille sauce</i>	sauce made from greens (usually manioc leaves)
<i>foutou</i>	sticky yam or plantain paste similar to <i>fufu</i> ; a staple in Côte d'Ivoire
<i>frites</i>	hot potato chips or French fries
<i>fufu</i>	a staple along the southern coast of West Africa made with fermented cassava, yams, plantain or manioc which is cooked and puréed; sometimes spelt <i>foufou</i>
<i>gargotte</i>	simple eating house or stall in Senegal, parts of Mali and Gambia; also spelt <i>gargote</i> or <i>gargot</i>
<i>gari</i>	powdered cassava
<i>gombo</i>	okra or lady's fingers
<i>groundnut</i>	peanut; sometimes called <i>arachide</i>
<i>haricot verte</i>	green bean
<i>jaxatu</i>	bitter flavouring
<i>jollof rice</i>	common dish throughout the region consisting of rice and vegetables with meat or fish; called <i>riz yollof</i> in Francophone countries
<i>kedjenou</i>	Côte d'Ivoire's national dish but available elsewhere; slowly simmered chicken or fish with peppers and tomatoes
<i>kinkiliba</i>	leaf that is sometimes used in coffee, giving it a woody tang
<i>kojo</i>	millet beer
<i>koutoukou</i>	a clear, strong alcohol home-made in Côte d'Ivoire
<i>mafé</i>	groundnut-based stew; also spelt <i>mafay</i>
<i>Maggi</i>	brand name for a ubiquitous flavouring used in soups, stews etc throughout the region
<i>maquis</i>	rustic open-air restaurant, primarily serving braised fish and grilled chicken with <i>attiéké</i> , and traditionally open only at night
<i>menu du jour</i>	meal of the day, usually at a special price; often shortened to <i>menu</i>
<i>palaver sauce</i>	usually made from spinach or other leaves plus meat/fish; also spelled <i>palava</i>
<i>palm wine</i>	a milky-white low-strength brew collected by tapping palm trees
<i>patate</i>	sweet potato
<i>pâte</i>	starch staple, often made from millet, corn, plantains, manioc or yams, eaten as an accompaniment to sauce; also called <i>akoumé</i>
<i>pito</i>	local brew in northern Ghana
<i>plantain</i>	a large green banana, which has to be cooked before eating
<i>plasas</i>	pounded potato or cassava leaves cooked with palm oil and fish or beer
<i>plat du jour</i>	the dish of the day, usually offered at a special price
<i>poisson</i>	fish
<i>pomme de terre</i>	potato
<i>poulet</i>	chicken

<i>poulet yassa</i>	grilled chicken in onion and lemon sauce; a Senegalese dish that's found in many countries throughout the region; similarly you get <i>poisson yassa</i> (fish), <i>viande yassa</i> (meat) and just <i>yassa</i>
<i>pression</i>	draught beer
<i>riz sauce</i>	very common basic meal (rice with sauce)
<i>rôtisserie</i>	food stall selling roast meat
<i>salon de thé</i>	literally 'tearoom'; café
<i>shwarma</i>	a popular and ubiquitous Lebanese snack of grilled meat in bread, served with salad and sesame sauce
<i>snack</i>	in Francophone Africa this means a place where you can get light meals and sandwiches, not the food itself; you'll often see signs saying 'Bar Snack', meaning you can get a beer or coffee too
<i>sodabe</i>	a spirit made in Togo
<i>spot</i>	simple bar
<i>sucrierie</i>	soft drink (literally 'sweet thing')
<i>suya</i>	Hausa word for brochette
<i>tiéboudienne</i>	Senegal's national dish, rice baked in thick sauce of fish and vegetables; also spelt <i>thieboudjenne</i>
<i>tô</i>	millet or sorghum-based <i>pâte</i>
<i>viande</i>	meat
<i>wigila</i>	Songhai speciality from Gao (Mali) of sun-dried dumplings dipped in a meat sauce made with cinnamon and spices
<i>yam</i>	edible starchy root; sometimes called <i>igname</i>

# The Music of West Africa

Music put West Africa on the map. Years ago, even if no one knew exactly where Senegal was, they knew that Youssou N'Dour lived there, and the great Baaba Maal. They could tell you that Salif Keita came from Mali, and Mory Kanté from Guinea. That Nigeria was home to Fela Kuti and *juju* music emperor, King Sunny Ade. Reggae-star Alpha Blondy defined the Ivory Coast. Saxophonist Manu Dibango was Cameroon, just as Cesária Evora was Cape Verde and Angélique Kidjo, Benin. All of these West African stars fuelled the global Afropop boom. Once filed under 'A' for Africa, they lent the world music genre much needed individuality, commerciality and cred.

The international success of these West African elders has paved the way for an apparently bottomless pot of talent. Desert rebels Tinariwen; dreadlocked Senegalese mystic Cheikh Lo; and his hotly tipped compatriot, Daby Baldé. The fresh prince of the Ivory Coast, Tiken Jah Fakoly, and its fresh princess, Dobet Gnahoré. Golden-voiced Mauritanian Daby Touré, and afrobeating politicians such as Nigeria's Femi Kuti (in looks, sound and sentiment, very much his father's son). Lura from Cape Verde, with her contemporary *morna* style, and Malians including ethereal songbird Rokia Traore, *kora* maestro Toumani Diabaté and husband-and-wife team Amadou and Mariam – whose Manu Chao-produced album, *Dimanche à Bamako*, went to the top of the global charts and stayed there.

Mentioning these names is only scratching the surface. Music is everywhere in West Africa, coming at you in thunderous, drum-fuelled polyrhythms, through the swooping, soaring voices of griots (traditional musicians or minstrels; praise singers) and via socially-aware reggae, rap and hip-hop. From Afro-beat to pygmy fusion, highlife to *makossa*, *gumbe* to Nigerian gospel, genres are as entrenched as they are evolving, fusing and re-forming. Little wonder that here – in this vast, diverse region, with its deserts, jungles, skyscrapers, and urban sprawl – myriad ethnic groups play out their lives to music. Here are traditional songs that celebrate weddings, offer solace at funerals, keep work rhythms steady in the fields. Here are songs and rhythms that travelled out on slave ships to Cuba and Brazil. Songs that retell history and, in doing so, foster inter-clan and inter-religious respect.

In West Africa, too, are the roots of Western music (along with guitars, keyboards, Latin influences and other legacies of colonialism). Not for nothing did Senegalese rap crew Daara J title their 2003 international debut *Boomerang*. 'Born in Africa, raised in America,' says member Faada Freddy, 'rap has come full circle.' As has the blues. A host of American blues musicians – Ry Cooder, Corey Harris, Taj Mahal, Bonnie Raitt – have found inspiration and affirmation in West Africa, in Mali in particular. 'I never heard American blues music before I started playing,' said the famed Malian guitarist, Ali Farke Touré, 'but when I did, I recognised it as African music, the music from my region.'

Even Blur and Gorillaz frontman Damon Albarn embarked on a love affair with West Africa, recording his hi-tech *Mali Music* album after a visit in 2000. His Honest Jons record label has since released a series of intriguing West African albums, including 2005's *Lagos Chop Up* and drummer Tony 'Afrobeat' Allen's 2006 offering, *Lagos Shaking*. 'The amazing thing about West Africa,' Albarn has said, 'is that you can hear all the components of Western music there.'

Cassette piracy is a huge problem in West Africa and many high profile names have devoted themselves to the task of its eradication.

Oumou Sangare is the owner of Bamako's Hotel Wasulu, a purpose-built 35-room hotel whose rooms are named after famous Malian musicians. There's an Ali Farke Touré room and, of course, an Oumou Sangare suite. Oh, and she is also the resident headliner.

Kora maestro Toumani Diabaté and his traditional-meets-modern big band the Symmetric Orchestra play Bamako's outdoor Hogon Club most Friday nights.

## TEN MUST-HAVE WEST AFRICAN ALBUMS

- *Dimanche à Bamako* (Because) by Amadou and Mariam
- *M'Bemba* (Universal Jazz France) by Salif Keita
- *In the Heart of the Moon* (World Circuit) by Ali Farke Touré and Toumani Diabaté
- *Worotan* (World Circuit) by Oumou Sangare
- *The Best Best of Fela Kuti* (MCA) by Fela Kuti
- *Nothing's In Vain* (Nonesuch) by Youssou N'Dour
- *Firin in Fouta* (Mango) by Baaba Maal
- *Juju Music* (Island) by King Sunny and his African Beats
- *Miss Perfumado* (Lusafrica) by Cesária Evora
- *Amassakoul* (Independent Records) By Tinariwen

You could, if you like, seek out the thriving West African scene in London or Paris, where many of the aforementioned West African acts have forged their international careers. But just as Salif Keita relocated to Bamako in 2005 after 20 years in Paris, it is better, really, to soak it up *in situ*. 'A trunk never turns into a crocodile, no matter how long it stays in the water', says Keita.

Trust us. Your musical tastes, attitude and perceptions will – like your iPod – never be the same again.

## A POTTED HISTORY OF WEST AFRICAN MUSIC

The musical history of West Africa is closely linked to its diverse and long-established empires, such as Ghana's (6th to 11th centuries), where court music was played for chiefs, music accompanied ceremonies and chores, and was played for pleasure at the end of the day. In the vast Mande Empire (13th to 15th centuries), music was the province of one social caste, the *jelis*, who still perform their folk styles today. Correspondingly in Senegal, griots – Wolof culture's *kora*-strumming, praise-singing caste – trace genealogies, recount epics and span generations. There are myriad musical styles in West Africa, courtesy of its hundreds of ethnic groups and various Islamic and European influences, but the *jeli/griot* tradition is arguably the best known.

Senegal, Gambia, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire all share the same *jeli* tradition, though each linguistic group calls it something different and each has its own subtly different sound. They are acknowledged as oral historians – nearly all children know the epic of Sundiata Keita, the warrior who founded the Mande Empire – and often as soothsayers, but, although they top the bill at weddings and naming ceremonies, *griots* occupy a lowly rank in their hierarchical societies. Many big West African stars faced parental objections to their choice of career. Others, such as Salif Keita – a direct descendent of Sundiata and as such, not a *jeli* – made their reputations in exile.

Oral tradition is equally strong in Nigeria, where stories of ancient Yoruba, Ashanti, Hausa and other kingdoms flourish. Like many a West African style, Yoruba music has its roots in percussion. Indeed, if there is any element common to the huge, diverse region that is West Africa, it is drumming. From the Ewe ensembles of Ghana – similar in style to those of Benin and Togo – to Senegal's sabar drummers, beating their giant instruments with sticks, drumming kick-started West Africa's

Radio Liberte ([www.comfm.com/musique](http://www.comfm.com/musique)) is a Bamako-based station with a global outlook.

*In Griot Time: An American Guitarist in Mali* (2002) is an acclaimed account of Malian musicians and culture, written by a fellow musician who spent seven months in Bamako playing guitar with Djelimady Tounkara, formerly of the legendary Super Rail Band.



## YOUSSEU N'DOUR

Dressed in white, arms spread wide, Youssou N'Dour stands on stage and unleashes his startling tenor. 'Africa...all...my...people', he sings, unaccompanied, his voice curling sensuously skywards, his eight-piece band, Le Super Étoile, ready for action. As the crowd roars its response, N'Dour launches into the funky, riotous sound he's famous for. Hits come in Wolof, French and English, including his 1994 smash duet with Neneh Cherry, 'Seven Seconds'. West Africa's greatest musical hero is, as ever, on message. His pride in his culture is obvious.

'Africa needs new, positive images', says the 47-year-old afterwards. 'For too long it has been seen as a place where war, poverty and sad things happen. But it is also a place of beauty and poetry, colour and music,' he sighs. 'It is up to African artists,' he adds, 'to bring these images to the West.'

For a long time it seemed to be up to Youssou N'Dour. One of a long line of Tukulor griots, N'Dour grew up singing alongside his mother at religious ceremonies. His swooping, soaring voice won him live slots on national radio and a boy-wonder status he exploited by hustling for gigs outside nightclubs like the Thoisiane, the Copacabana-style venue in Dakar that he now owns. By 16 he was in the line-up of Ibra Kasse's Star Band and, soon after, Étoile de Dakar. Aged 18 he formed Le Super Étoile de Dakar, throwing in Latin influences, adding guitars and keyboards and reclaiming the big Senegalese sabar drum. The sound, *mbalax*, spawned a phenomenon.

N'Dour set about straddling the commercial and traditional worlds. He introduced funk and fusion into his sound, then achieved world renown in the 1980s when he supported Peter Gabriel in concert and starred alongside Gabriel, Sting and Bruce Springsteen on the celebrated 1988 Amnesty International Tour. A series of glossy crossover albums followed, but it was 2002's acoustic *Nothing's In Vain* and 2004's inspired, Grammy-winning *Egypt* (a paean to Islam composed on Senegalese instruments and recorded with an Egyptian Orchestra) that had critics doing backflips. Having cancelled a US tour in March 2003 in protest at the invasion of Iraq, the *Egypt* album was the album that he always wanted to make. A new album is scheduled for 2007.

Among other projects, N'Dour owns a record label, Jololi, a cassette factory, a radio station, a newspaper and Xippi, the country's best recording studio, from where he produces rap artists for the local market ('Wolof rap will never be popular outside Senegal', he says). He enjoys his role at the top, from where he channels his wealth into community projects. When he's not touring, and he tours often (scandalously, he was the only African star to play at the 2005 Live8 concert in Hyde Park). N'Dour regularly gigs at the Thoisiane where, though he's rarely onstage before 3am, he always gets a stomping, shouting hero's welcome.

'I have a message to deliver to the world,' says N'Dour, 'and that message is in the music.'

Youssou N'Dour is the host of the Great African Ball, a Senegalese-style shindig that takes place in New York, Paris and Milan each year, attracting glammed-up expats from a variety of African countries. These five-hour extravaganzas offer the same sort of collective spectacle as laid on at the Thoisiane.

musical heart. Often accompanied by ululation, vocal repetition, call-and-response vocals and polyrhythms, drums beat out a sound that immediately says 'Africa'.

As West African music travelled out on the slave ships (and brought other influences back with it later), so the music of the colonisers travelled in. The Portuguese presence in Cape Verde created *morna*, music of separation, and *saudade*, and creole-style *gumbe* in Guinea-Bissau. Western-style dance orchestras had the colonial elite fox-trotting on the Gold Coast. Francophone Africa fell in love with Cuban dance music, a genre, in rhythm and structure, remarkably close to Mande music. Cuban music (and guitar-based Congolese rumba) introduced modern instruments to the region, creating a swathe of dance bands such as Guinea's legendary Bembeya Jazz (a signifier of modern music, 'jazz' was commonly tagged on a band's name), who played local styles with Latin arrangements.

Post-independence, the philosophy of 'negritude' – or cultural rediscovery – arose among some 1960s-era West African governments. Popular Latin sounds were discouraged in favour of folkloric material. Electric Afropop began to incorporate traditional rhythms and instruments, such

as the *kora* (a harp-like musical instrument with over 20 strings), balafon (xylophone), and *ngoni* (stringed instrument). State-sponsored dance bands won big audiences and spawned even bigger stars. The first president of Senegal (poet Leopold Senghor) fostered the young Orchestra Baobab band, whose phenomenal 21st-century comeback continues. Mali's Le Rail Band du Bamako (sponsored by the Malian Railway Company) became an African institution that launched the careers of two of Africa's greatest singers: Salif Keita and Mory Kanté.

When the young Maninka singer Salif Keita defected to their foreign-style rivals, Les Ambassadeurs du Motel, there was uproar. Fierce, Oasis-vs-Blur-style competition ensued throughout the 1970s, making Bamako the dance music capital of West Africa (see p499). Meanwhile, in Nigeria, the poppy highlife sound of the 1940s, '50s and '60s gave way to genres with a strong percussive element, such as *juju* and *fuji*. The West's popular music genres – rock, soul, jazz, funk, pop – made their mark, each spawning its own 'Afro' equivalent. Today the likes of 1960s' Sierra-Leonean Afro-soul king Geraldo Pino and Ghanaian Afro-rock collective Osibisa are being rediscovered by a new generation of Western hipsters.

The recording studios of Lagos offered commercial opportunities for Nigerian performers, as did those of 1980s' Abidjan in Coté d'Ivoire – a musical Mecca for artists from across the continent. But by the mid-1980s all eyes were on Paris, the city where Mory Kanté recorded his seminal club floor track 'Yeke Yeke', and where innumerable West African musicians lived. Big names moved back and forth between Paris and London and West Africa, recording cassettes for the local market and albums for the international one, as remains the case today. With the 1990s' world-music boom, many stars – Youssou N'Dour, Salif Keita, Cesária Evora, King Sunny Ade – established their own record companies, and signed up local talent.

Some savvy Western record labels pre-empted mainstream interest in West African music. London-based World Circuit signed the likes of Ali Farke Touré, Cheikh Lo, Oumou Sangare and Orchestra Baobab, arguably doing for West Africa what it did for Cuba with the Buena Vista Allstars. West African artists are now staples of international festivals including Womad and Glastonbury. Club producers have remixed Cesária Evora, Femi Kuti and Rokia Traore. West African albums make it into mainstream charts, West African musicians sell out Western venues and Western musicians look to West Africa for inspiration.

In West Africa, big-name artists attract hordes of followers wherever they go. The politicians who try to hijack such popularity are usually shrugged off. Youssou N'Dour, Baaba Maal et al are international ambassadors in their own right, stars who use their position (and their lyrics) to campaign against poverty, disease and illiteracy. Oumou Sangare sings, however obliquely, about women's rights. The rap movement in Senegal promotes peace and love. But freedom of expression is still curtailed, and Femi Kuti's pro-democracy narratives are censored in Nigeria, just as his father's were.

Latin music remains popular in Mali. Guitar-based highlife is still a staple of Ghana, where hip life – the country's very own hip-hop – is also huge. Nigerian music isn't as popular in the West as it was; Mali, Guinea and Senegal and The Gambia are currently ahead in the popularity stakes. Traditional acoustic albums from that region have been enjoying a renaissance and Salif Keita, Youssou N'Dour, Baaba Maal and Mory Kanté have all recently unplugged. Everywhere, musicians are creating, collaborating, experimenting. New, exciting performers are constantly emerging.

West African music has never been healthier. Styles may change, but one thing, at least, is certain: the drums will beat forever.

Afropop (www.afropop.org) aims to be the premier destination for web denizens interested in the contemporary music of Africa and the African diaspora; highlights include streaming audio and a searchable database.

The great bluesman Ali Farke Touré, who passed away from cancer in March 2006, was the mayor of his hometown, Niafunké, a village near his farm on the the Niger River in Timbuktu (Tombouctou) province. 'Your job on earth is to share what gifts God has given you', he says. Check out his posthumously released album, *Savane*.

## TINARIWEN

Tinariwen loosen their turbans when they play away from home. Sand is never a problem outside of the Sahara. Back home it gets into ears and mouths, making it hard to sing, and under the fretboards of their Fender Stratocasters, making them hard to play. Not that this most rugged of guitar bands, a collective of Tuareg nomads from Kidal, a dusty town way out past Timbuktu, are bothered. Even their name means 'desert'. The sound conjured by their chants, ululations and call-and-response vocals, hand claps, hand-drums and wall of guitars, is all space and spirit. Their attitude – reflective, angry, resilient – is pure desert blues.

And if anyone has the right to play the blues, it's the Tuareg. Once upon a time these nomadic pastoralists roamed the Sahara with their cattle, camels and goats, but African independence left them exposed to old enmities in the 1960s, and their living was devastated by drought in the following decades. Conflict with the Malian authorities was ongoing – eventually leading to a bloody rebellion (see p529) – and in the 1980s many Tuareg ended up in Libyan President Gaddafi's training camps, where they fought unrelated battles and – in Tinariwen's case – learned how to play guitar. Legend has it they went to battle with Kalashnikovs in one hand and guitars slung across their backs.

'Desert life is hard,' says bandleader Ibrahim Ag Alhabib, 45, through a cloud of cigarette smoke, 'our own music, our own poetry is vital.' Tinariwen's songs tell the lives of their dispossessed kinsmen; passed on by generations of cheap cassette recordings, they have become as anthemic in the Sahara as those of, say, the Rolling Stones or White Stripes – bands with whom they've been compared.

'I have had sadness from an early age,' says Ibrahim. 'I saw my father killed by Malian soldiers. I grew up in exile in Algeria, fending for myself.' Music offered an escape. In the camps he met other musically minded freedom fighters. They threw out the traditional lute and one-stringed fiddle, and set their traditional rhythms to the electric guitar. 'At first we improvised with tin cans, sticks and string. Then somehow we got hold of guitars and taught ourselves how to play.'

They became so popular that the Malian government outlawed possession of their cassettes. 'But we were singing about hardship, about the desert, about taking pride in your heritage,' Ibrahim insists. In 2000 a rejigged Tinariwen recorded their debut album, the Radio Tisdas Sessions, in Kidal's electricity-starved local radio station. In 2001 they hosted the first annual Festival in the Desert in Essakane (see p540 and p525), an interclan get together so unique and exotic that the likes of Damon Albarn and Robert Plant have suffered the three-day slog to get there.

'The Tuareg have always placed a great importance on gatherings,' offers Ibrahim. Which is why, perhaps, Tinariwen's seven-strong touring line-up – six tough men and one demure but feisty woman, all in pale, flowing robes – have become a staple of the international festival circuit. They won a BBC World Music Award (Africa) for their second album, 2004's *Amassakoul* and, with their mesmeric sounds and effortless left-field cred, have become *the* world music name to drop. A new album is out in 2006.

'Life has improved for the Tuareg people,' says Ibrahim, 'and I know Tinariwen have helped. Our message is being heard further away.' He dusts some imaginary sand off his shoe. 'We just want to take people with us,' he says, 'and the place we are going is back home.'

## WEST AFRICAN INSTRUMENTS

West Africa's traditional instruments tend to be found in its rural areas and are generally fashioned from local materials – everything from gourds, stalks and shells to goat skin, cow horns and horse hair. Discarded objects and nature also have multiple musical uses; in Sierra Leone, empty Milo tins filled with stones were the core instrument for the genre called Milo-jazz. Hausa children in Nigeria beat rhythms on the inflated belly of a live pufferfish. The Pygmies of Cameroon beat rhythms on river water.

There are bells made of bronze in the Islamic orchestras of northern Nigeria, and scrapers made of iron in the south. In Cape Verde women

place a rolled-up cloth between their legs and beat it as part of their *batuco* music (the singer Lura does this live, with silver lamé). Everywhere, there is men's music and women's music, men's instruments and women's instruments: in Mauritania, men play the *tidinit*, a four-stringed lute, and women the *ardin*, a sort of back-to-front *kora*. Accordingly there are men's dances and women's dances. And most of these, like most instrumental ensembles, are fuelled by drums.

West Africa has a phenomenal variety of drums. Kettle, slit and talking drums; water, frame and hourglass-shaped drums; log, goblet and double-headed barrel drums. Drums used for ritual purposes, like the *dundun* drums of the Yoruba, which communicate with the *orishas*; drums made from tree trunks and used for long distance messages; drums that mark the major events of one's life – baptism, marriage, death – and drums for entertainment. 'Talking' drums, such as the Wolof *tama*, a small, high-pitched instrument clamped under the armpit and beaten fast with a hooked stick, or the *djembe*, the chalice-shaped drum ubiquitous from Ghana to Senegal, and in the West's endorphin-inducing African drum circles.

There's a diverse array of string instruments too, from the one-stringed viol of the Niger Tuareg and the 13-string *obo* zither of the Igbo in Nigeria, to the 21-string *kora* – the harp/lute of the *griots* and one of the most sophisticated instruments in sub-Saharan Africa. *Kora* players are usually virtuosos, having studied their craft from childhood. Mory Kanté's amplified rock-style *kora* helped establish its reputation as a formidable solo instrument, while *kora* master Toumani Diabaté, son of the virtuoso Sidiki Diabaté, displayed its crossover potential by collaborating with everyone from flamenco musicians to bluesmen Ali Farke Touré and Taj Mahal.

Regarded by some as the precursor to the banjo, the *ngoni* (*xalam* in Wolof, *hoddau* in Fula, *konting* in Mandinka) is also popular with *griots*. A feature in the 14th-century courts of Mali, it has between three and five strings which are plucked, and is tricky to play. Another well-known *griot* instrument is the *balafon*, a wooden xylophone with between 18 and 21 keys, suspended over a row of gourds to amplify the sound. The *balafon* is often played in pairs, with each musician – one improvising, one not – striking the keys with wooden mallets. The Susu people of Guinea are renowned *balafon* experts.

There are other xylophones with different names in West Africa, xylophones fashioned from huge logs, or xylophones amplified by boxes and pits. There are wind instruments (Fula shepherds play melodies on reed flutes) and brass instruments (the Niger Tuareg favour the *alghaita shawm* trumpet) and voices used as instruments – such as the timeless vocals of the *griots*, the polyphonic singing of the Pygmies and the sung poetry of the Tuareg.

Across the region, percussion vies and blends with brass and wood and wind instruments. In urban areas, traditional instruments complement and ground modern instruments. West Africa is, indeed, a hive of musical activity, thrumming to its own collective orchestra.

## WEST AFRICAN MUSICAL STYLES

While mega-successful artists like Mory Kanté, Angélique Kidjo, Salif Keita, Kandia Kouyaté, Cheikh Lo, Baaba Maal, Youssou N'Dour, Oumou Sangare, the late Ali Farke Touré and Rokia Traoré et al (and it's a big et al) might be classified as 'Afro-pop', thanks to commercial sales at home and/or in the West, the region boasts a gamut of distinctive musical styles. The following are just a few of them.

*Songs of West Africa* (2000) contains over 80 traditional African folk songs and chants in six languages, along with extensive translations, music fundamentals, a pronunciation guide and introductions to West African society. Oh, and a sing-along CD.

Martin Scorsese presents the Blues: *Feels Like Going Home* (Martin Scorsese; 2003) follows musician Corey Harris' travels through Mississippi and West Africa, exploring the roots of blues music. Includes performances by Salif Keita, Habib Kolté, Taj Mahal and Ali Farke Touré.

## Afrobeat

Co-created by the late, great Fela Anikulapo Kuti, Afrobeat is a hybrid of Nigerian highlife, Yoruba percussion, jazz, funk and soul. Fela, a singer, saxophonist and bandleader, and one of the most influential 20th-century African figures, used Afrobeat to give voice to the oppressed. His onstage rants, tree-trunk-sized spliff in hand, were legendary. A succession of governments tried to shut him up. When he died of AIDS in 1997, a million people joined his funeral procession through Lagos (see p627 for more). His son, Femi, has picked up the baton, releasing fine albums such as *Shoki Shoki* and reopening his father's Lagos night club, the Shrine. A host of Fela imitators – Tony Allen, the masked Lagbaja, and Fela's youngest son, Seun – keep the flame alight. A recent surge in interest has seen Afrobeat crossover into dance mixes, hip-hop and reggae collaborations.

## Cape Verdean Music

Cape Verdean music came late to the West. The undisputed star of the bluesy, melancholy songs (known as *morna*) is the 'barefoot diva' Cesária Evora, a ciggie-puffing grandmother erroneously thought to appear onstage without shoes in support of the disadvantaged women in her country ('No,' she says, 'I just don't like wearing shoes.'). European influences are obvious in *morna*, the equivalent to Portugal's *fado*, while Africa is at the fore in other genres such as the dance-oriented *coladeira*, accordion-led *funana* and percussive women's music, *batuco*. Look out for recordings by *morna* tenor Bana, the Lisbon-based Lura and Tcheka, a singer/songwriter and guitarist who plays beats that are normally played on percussion.

## Gumbe

Closely associated with Guinea-Bissau, *gumbe* is an uptempo, polyrhythmic genre that fuses about ten of the country's folk music traditions. Lyrics, sung in Portuguese creole, are topical and witty; instruments include guitars and the water drum, an upturned calabash floating in a bucket. Civil unrest rendered *gumbe* a latecomer to the West, until the Lisbon-based Manecas Costa brought out his acclaimed 2004 album *Paradiso di Gumbe*. In Sierra Leone, *gumbe* evolved from the breezy, calypso-style guitar music called palm-wine. The late SE Rogie and London-based Abdul Tee-Jay are probably the best-known exponents. In Nigeria, palm-wine gave rise to *juju* and in Ghana, to highlife.

## Highlife

Ghana's urban, upbeat highlife, which started off in the dancehalls of the colonial Gold Coast, has had a ripple effect throughout West Africa. Trumpeter and bandleader ET Mensah was the post-war, pan-African king of this sound, a blend of everything from Trinidadian calypso, brass band music and Cuban son, to swing, jazz and older African song forms. Osibisa were the 'Afro-rock' pop/highlife group of the 1970s. Today's hybrids include gospel, hip-hop (hip-life) and the ever-popular guitar highlife. The Western Diamonds, Amekye Dede and Jewel Ackah are popular artists. Highlife is also a staple of Sierra Leone, Liberia and (with a Congolese influence) Nigeria. Check out early recordings by Dr Victor Olaiya, Nigerian highlife's 'evil genius' and his band, Cool Cats.

## Juju

*Juju* music evolved from a mix of traditional Yoruba talking drums and folklore, and popular palm-wine guitar music. *Juju's* best known ambassador, King Sunny Ade, has been deploying his relentless blend of

ringing guitar lines, multilayered percussion, tight harmonies and booty shaking for four decades now. In Nigeria he's known as KSA, the Minister for Enjoyment. Competition with his main rival, Chief Commander Ebenezer Obey, continues, with the likes of Sir Shina Peters close behind. *Juju* is not to be confused with the Arabesque percussion frenzy that is *fuji*: main players here include elder statesman Sir Ayinde Barrister and innovators Pasuma Wonder and Adewale Ayuba, whose recent award-winning collaboration with Adé Bantu, *Fuji Satisfaction*, added Afrobeat, ragga, rap and hip-hop.

## Makossa

A fusion of highlife and soul, influenced by Congolese rumba and characterised by electric guitars, Cameroon's distinctive pop-*makossa* music remains one of West Africa's most vibrant dance genres. It's biggest star is still the jazz-minded sax player and singer Manu Dibango (track down his 1973 release, *Soul Makossa*), who has worked in related genres such as *mangambe*, *assiko* and *bikutsi* and regularly sells out London venues such as Ronnie Scott's. The ever-adventurous Francis Bebey is another big name, while Sam Fan Thomas has popularised *makassi*, a sort of *makossa*-lite. Other names include Toto Guillaume, Ekambi Brilliant and the guitarist Vincent Nguini.

## Mbalax

Taken from the Wolof word for rhythm, *mbalax* is Senegal's primary musical genre, an intensely polyrhythmic sound that evolved in the 1970s from Afro-Cuban dance bands such as the Star Band and Orchestra Baobab, and then fiercely reclaimed its African roots. Youssou N'Dour was the first to introduce more traditional elements, including *tassou* (a form of rap), *bakou* (a kind of trilling) and instruments such as the *tama* and *sabar* drums. Popular *mbalax* artists include females Khar M'Baye Maddiagaga, Kine Lam and N'Dour's Britney-esque sister-in-law, Vivianne.

## Reggae, Rap & Hip-Hop

Afro-reggae, rap and hip-hop are huge throughout West Africa. Elder Ivorian statesman Alpha Blondy has enjoyed a 20-year career, spawning hits like the classic 'Jerusalem', recorded in Jamaica with the Wailers. His younger, equally political, compatriots include Serge Kassy and Tiken Jah Fakoly. Ivorian hip-hop includes the gangsta-style rap *dogba*, which contrasts with the socially aware, anti-bling Wolof rap of Senegalese outfits such as Daara J and Positive Black Soul. There is a growing Mandinka rap scene in Mali (check out the album *Mandinka Rap From Mali* (Naxos World) by the rapping *griot* duo Les Escrocs). Majek Fashek is the best known Nigerian reggae artist, and Nigerian hip-hop musicians include Eedris Abdulkareem – he of the much-hyped spat with 50 Cent – along with JJC and the 419 Squad. Rap Nigerien (sic) is a melange of different languages spoken in Niger – as deployed by groups such as Was Wong, Gogro G and Metaphor – and covers such topics as forced marriages, child labour and corruption.

## Wassoulou

Wassoulou music is named after the region of the same name, south of Bamako in Mali (p490), and the Fula people who inhabit it. Wassoulou is not *jeli* music – they have no castes – but is based on hunting songs. The women usually sing, and the men dance. The music is based on the

*Fela Kuti: Music is the Weapon* (1982) is a hard-hitting documentary filmed in Lagos, mixing interviews with Kuti with footage of life at his Kalakuta Republic, and performances at his Shrine nightclub. Comes with a double CD of Kuti's best-known songs.

African Music Encyclopedia ([www.africanmusic.org](http://www.africanmusic.org)) offers a country-by-country, artist-by-artist breakdown for lovers of music from Africa and the African diaspora.

Conakry's Radio Kankan ([www.radio-kankan.com](http://www.radio-kankan.com)) is a French-language station devoted to news and music from the region.

*I'll Sing for You* (Je Chanterai Pour Toi; 2001) is an award-winning, life-affirming documentary featuring legendary Mali bluesman Boubacar 'KarKar' Traoré returning to his homeland after decades of self-imposed exile in France.

Africanhiphop.com ([www.africanhiphop.com](http://www.africanhiphop.com)) has been mapping the development of African hip-hop culture since the '90s; features links, new productions and contributions from the artists themselves.

*kamalengoni* or youth's harp – a sort of funky, jittery bass guitar invented in the 1950s – and is augmented by the thwack and slap of the *fle*, a calabash strung with cowrie shells and thrown and spun in the air. Having shot to fame with her 1989 release, *Moussoulou*, Oumou Sangare is still the biggest Wassoulou star, singing, however obliquely, in her native Bambara about the injustices of life in West Africa: polygamy, arranged marriages, the price of a bride. 'There is still much work to be done,' she says. A new album is due out in 2007.



# Arts & Craftwork

West Africa's rich and famous artistic heritage is one of the most vibrant found anywhere in the world. The fascinating traditional sculptures (in wood, bronze and other materials), masks, striking textiles and jewellery are one of the enduring threads of the region's unique cultures that remain, in some cases, largely unchanged from the days when fabulously wealthy empires ruled the land. At the same time, what brings West African art alive is that it remains at the centre of cultural life and still carries powerful meaning for Africa's diverse peoples.

## MASKS

In West Africa there is a staggering range of shapes and styles of mask, from the tiny 'passport' mask of the Dan to the snake-like Dogon *iminana* mask, which can tower up to 10m in height.

Masks, which are usually created by professional artisans, can be made of wood, brass, tin, leather, cloth, glass beads, natural fibres and even (in the case of the Ashanti) gold. They are also made in a number of forms, including face masks, helmet masks (which cover the whole head), head-dresses (which are secured to the top of the head), the massive *nimba* masks of the Baga tribe in Guinea (which are carried on the dancer's shoulders) and the famous ivory hip masks from the Kingdom of Benin (present-day Nigeria), which are worn around the waist.

West African masks are usually classified as anthropomorphic (resembling the human form) and zoomorphic (the representation of deities in the form of animals). Anthropomorphic masks are often carefully carved and can be very realistic. Many tribal groups use masks representing beautiful maidens, whose features reflect the aesthetic ideal of the people. The zoomorphic masks mostly represent dangerous and powerful nature spirits, and can be an abstract and terrifying combination of gaping jaws, popping eyes and massive horns. Some masks combine human and animal features. These convey the links between humans and animals, in particular the ability to gain and control the powers of animals and the spirits they represent.

The mask is only part of a complex costume that often covers the dancer's entire body. Made of plant fibre or cloth, often with elaborate appliqué, the costume is usually completed with a mane of raffia surrounding the mask. Most masks are associated with dance, although some are used as prestige symbols and are worn as amulets. For more information on the masks and statues of Côte d'Ivoire – where West Africa's woodcarving tradition is at its richest – see p262.

## TEXTILES

Few places in the world can match West Africa for the beauty, vitality, colour and range of its textiles. Contrary to what many travellers expect, men are the main producers of textiles (the *bogolan* cloth of Mali is an exception), weaving wool, cotton, nylon, rayon and silk on a variety of looms. Most of West Africa's textiles follow the strip-cloth technique, whereby cloth is woven in narrow strips which are then sewn together. As many West Africans now wear Western clothes and traditional textiles are largely reserved for ceremonial occasions, the skills required to produce the finer textiles are disappearing, a trend that sales to collectors and tourists can only partly ameliorate.

*African Masks*, by Iris Hahner-Herzog, catalogues more than 200 masks from a private collection from West and Central Africa, and is essential reading for those who plan to start their own, albeit more modest, collection.

Some art historians believe that one of Picasso's most famous paintings – *Les Femmes d'Alger*, which is often cited as the first work of the cubist form for which he later became famous – depicts women wearing ceremonial Dogon masks.

The New York-based Museum for African Art ([www.africanart.org](http://www.africanart.org)) has good general information on African masks.

### THE MASK COMES ALIVE

In West Africa, masks were rarely produced for purely decorative purposes. Rather they were highly active signifiers of the spirit world and played a central role in local ceremonies that served to both accompany important rites of passage and to entertain.

When masks and costumes are worn for a dance, which is accompanied by percussive music and song, they come alive and convey their meaning to the audience. Masked dances are used in initiation and coming-of-age ceremonies; in burial rituals, when dancing and celebrations assist the spirit of the dead to forsake the earth and reside with ancestors; in fertility rituals, which are associated with agriculture and the appeasement of spirits to ensure a successful harvest; and in the rituals surrounding childbirth. Masks fulfil the function of entertainment, with community-based dances and theatrical plays being created for social education and enjoyment.

The role of the mask is, however, changing. Christianity, Islam and the 20th century have had a big impact on the animist masked dances of West Africa. Many dances are no longer performed, and sometimes those that are have transformed from sacred rituals to forms of entertainment. Since the arrival in Africa of tourists and collectors, artisans have also begun to produce masks for widespread sale. This serves to keep artisans employed in their traditional art at a time when demand from traditional sources is endangering the future of such traditions. Indeed the masks' (and artisans') changing role in society may merely be the latest evidence that masking traditions were never static and continue to transmute over time.

It is still possible to see masked dances in West Africa, although they may be specially arranged 'tourist' performances. Getting to see the real thing is often a matter of being in the right place at the right time. For information on Dogon masks, see p517.

### Kente Cloth

Probably the best-known West African fabric is the colourful kente cloth from Ghana, made by the Ashanti people. Clothing is one of the most visual and important marks of distinction in Ashanti society and the people clearly have a flair for exuberance, as expressed in the brightest of colours. The basic traditional garment for men is a long rectangular piece of *ntoma* (cloth) passed over the left shoulder and brought around the body like a toga. The earliest kente cloth was cotton, but from the 18th century Ashanti weavers began incorporating designs using unravelled, imported Dutch silk. Silk has since gone on to be the fabric of prestige and the most expensive kente cloths contain silk (or imported rayon).

The weaving is done exclusively by men (usually working outdoors) who weave narrow, brightly coloured strips with complex patterns and rich hues. Kente cloth is worn only in the southern half of Ghana and is generally reserved for prestigious events.

The Ewe also weave kente cloth, but their designs are somewhat different and include motifs of geometric figures. Every design has a meaning and some designs are reserved exclusively for royal families.

### Adinkra Cloth

Just as impressive as the better-known kente cloth, *adinkra* cloth (a colourful cotton material with black geometric designs or stylised figures stamped on it) is also from Ghana. The word '*adinkra*' means 'farewell', and Ghanaians consider this fabric most appropriate for funerals.

Originally the printing was done on cotton pieces laid on the ground. Today, the cotton fabric is cut into long pieces, spread on a raised padded board and held in place by nails. The symbolic designs are cut on calabash stamps, and the dye is made from the bark of a local tree called *badie*. The printer dips the calabash into the hot dye and presses it onto the fabric.

For some interesting history about kente, Ghana's most famous textile, as well as a discussion of the different kente designs, visit [www.ghana.co.uk/history/fashion/kente.htm](http://www.ghana.co.uk/history/fashion/kente.htm).

The colourful cloth worn by women all throughout West Africa, often in two or three pieces, owes little to traditional craftsmanship – it is usually imported or locally produced 'Dutch wax', a factory-made material using stencils and a batik process.

The rich colours are about far more than aesthetics – each colour has a special significance: vermilion (red) symbolises the earth, blue signifies love, and yellow represents success and wealth.

### Bogolan Cloth

From the Sahel region of Mali comes *bogolan* cloth (called *bokolanfini* in Bambara, and often simply referred to as 'mud cloth'). This textile can be found in markets throughout much of West Africa, but its true home is Djenné.

The cloth is woven in plain cotton strips, sewn together and dyed yellow using a solution made from the leaves of a local tree. If you thought mud was mud, think again – after weaving, the cloth is covered in designs using various types of mud from different sources: mud from sandstone outcrops is used for reds and oranges; mud from riverbeds is used for blacks and greys. The cloth is left to dry in the sun, and the mud designs are then removed, leaving their imprint – the effect is very striking.

Designs are traditionally geometric and abstract, but *bogolan* cloth made specifically for tourists is more representational, showing animals, markets or village scenes. Some designs are very complex and involve many hours of work by the artists, who are all women. *Bogolan* cloth is usually used for wall hangings and bedcovers, and is also sometimes used for making waistcoats, caps and bags.

### Indigo Cloth

Another classic West African fabric is the indigo-dyed cotton worn primarily by the Tuareg as robes and headdresses. The indigo colour comes from the indigofera plant and the indigo vine; the plant is crushed and fermented, then mixed with an alkaline solution to produce the dye. The dyed cloth is often beaten with a mallet to produce a sheen. Other West African tribes noted for their use of indigo include the Hausa, Baoulé, Yoruba and Soninké.

The Yoruba produce an indigo-dyed cloth, *aderi*, which has designs that are applied using the tie-dye technique, or by painting motifs with a dye-resistant starch. The Dogon also produce an indigo cloth, which has characteristic geometric patterns.

### Other Textiles

The Fula have a caste of weavers, called Maboub, who produce blankets known as *khasa*. These are usually made from camel hair, although the term is sometimes used to describe cotton blankets as well. The Maboub also make rare and expensive wedding blankets. These large and elaborately detailed textiles are traditionally displayed around the marriage bed.

The Fon and the Fanti are known for their appliqué banners and flags. Shapes of people and animals are cut from colourful material and are carefully sewn onto a cloth panel.

The Hausa are known for their embroidery, which was once hand-stitched onto their robes and caps. Although now machine-stitched, the designs remain unchanged. In keeping with Islam, Hausa designs are nonfigurative.

### JEWELLERY

West Africans love their jewellery, which is important to both men and women, and wherever you go you're likely to see a fascinating variety of designs.

*Bogolan: Shaping Culture through Cloth in Contemporary Mali*, by Victoria L. Rovine, is splendidly photographed and is a fine study of how Malian textile art has changed along with the outside influences which Mali has been increasingly subjected to.

The Tuareg were once famously known as the 'Blue People of the Sahara' because the indigo of their clothing rubs off on their skin – an effect that they admire. Indigo cloth is, however, used less often now and usually only for special occasions.

*African Elegance*, by Ettagale Blauer, is a magnificently photographed chronicle of African art forms and their role in modern Africa – the sections on masks and jewellery are of particular interest.

*Africa Adorned*, by Angela Fisher, is an extravagantly beautiful coffee-table book that could just be the finest of its kind, with some exceptional and detailed sections on African jewellery.

The humble bead is elevated to high art in this part of the world and they serve as more than simple adornments – they are often used as objects representing spiritual values, and can play a major role in community rituals such as birth, circumcision, marriage and death. Like most major art forms, bead-making has changed over time, particularly since the arrival of Europeans. Beads are now more likely to be made of glass, after local jewellers started copying the highly decorative *millefiori* trading beads from Venice, which featured flowers, stripes and mosaic designs. Discarded bottles and medicine jars were pulverised into a fine powder to be remade into glass beads and the Krobo in Ghana still melt powdered glass in terracotta moulds. In a slight variation, the Nupe in central Nigeria wind molten glass on long iron rods to make beads and bracelets. Referred to as *bakim-mutum* by bead traders (most of whom sell glass beads by weight, hence their other name, ‘pound beads’), beads are commonly worn by village chiefs and elders as a sign of power and wealth.

A variety of other materials are used in Africa for making beads, including coral, shell, copal, amazonite, silver, gold and brass. In Mali you’ll see large amber beads worn by Fula women. The Dogon also treasure amber, and use it in their necklaces, bracelets and pendants. They also use beads made of stone and terracotta incised with geometric patterns.

Rings in West Africa are sometimes stunning. In Burkina Faso, look out for Bobo bronze rings, which often have intricate designs, including a tick bird, a warrior on horseback or a chameleon. In Mali, older Dogon men wear large bronze rings as a sign of status. All over the region you’ll find beautiful dark-green malachite jewellery, which usually comes from Congo (Zaire). Cowrie shells are often used to decorate jewellery; for a long time these shells were used as money in many areas of Africa.

The Ashanti are famous for their goldwork in jewellery, ornaments and staffs, and in most areas of the region the preferred metal for jewellery is gold. In and near the Sahara, however, the Tuareg and Moors prefer silver. The Tuareg are renowned for their intricate filigree silverwork in jewellery and in the decoration on the handles of their daggers. Tuareg men and women often wear silver crosses as pendants around their necks. These come in various designs, characterised by protective symbolism. Some incorporate circle and phallus designs, or fertility symbols; those representing a camel’s eye or jackal tracks are symbolic of power and cunning.

## TOTEMS & TALISMANS

An important feature of traditional religions is the totem, which is an object (usually representing an animal) that serves as an emblem for a particular tribe, and is usually connected with the original ancestor of that group. It is taboo for a member of the clan whose totem is, for example, a snake, to harm any snake, as this would be harming the ancestor. Other common totems include lions, crocodiles and birds.

Talismans (sometimes called fetishes) are another important feature in animism. These are objects (or charms) that are believed to embody a spirit, and can take many forms. For example, bird skulls and other animal parts may be used as charms by a learned elder for helping people communicate with their ancestors. The elders (usually men) that are responsible for these sacred objects are sometimes called fetish-priests or *féticheurs*.

The most common charms found throughout West Africa are the small leather or metal amulets, often containing a sacred object, which are worn by people around the neck, arm or waist. These are called grigri and are usually worn to ward off evil or bring good luck. Many West African

Muslims (including the Tuareg) also wear grigri, which are called *t’awiz* in other Islamic countries; there is often a small verse from the Qur’an inside and they are only considered effective if made by a marabout.

## FIGURATIVE SCULPTURE

African sculpture is now considered one of the most dynamic and influential art forms around. Once relegated to curio cabinets and dusty museum storerooms, and labelled as crude, barbaric and primitive, African carving finally gained credibility in the early 20th century when Picasso, Matisse and others found inspiration in its radical approach to the human form.

Most West African sculpture is carved in wood, but some superb bronze and iron figures are produced, and some funerary figures are created in terracotta and mud. The strange and uncompromising forms found in West African sculpture are rarely the unique creations of an inspired artist – the sculptures have always been made to fulfil specific functions within the tribe, using centuries-old designs redolent with meaning.

In West Africa, sculpture is mostly used in connection with ancestor or spirit worship. Many tribal groups believe that the spirits of the dead can have a major impact, both positive and negative, on a person’s life. Ancestral figures are carved and placed in shrines and altars where they receive libations and sacrificial blood. Some tribes carve figures that are cared for by women to ensure fertility and in the hope that the resulting child will inherit the fine looks represented in the sculpture. The famous *akuaba* ‘doll’ of the Ashanti is the best-known example of this. Prestige objects are also carved, such as figurative staffs of office, commemorative statues and other regalia used by kings, chiefs, traditional healers and diviners as emblems of power.

West African sculpture is usually created by a professional artist, who is almost always male and who has learned his craft through an apprenticeship. Mostly a family- or caste-specific occupation, the forms and skills are passed down from generation to generation, resulting in highly refined styles.

Like in any nonstatic cultural tradition, the process is does change – occasionally a virtuoso carver will introduce new elements that may then be incorporated by other artists. In many cases a carver will be commissioned to create a work. After payment has been arranged, the carver selects the wood required, which can involve lengthy rituals. He then blocks out the form using an adze, completes the finer details with a knife and, traditionally, sands the carving with a species of rough leaf.

Across the many tribal-specific styles produced in West Africa, some common characteristics can be identified. The figure is usually symmetrical and faces forward, the features are impassive and the arms are held to the side with the legs slightly bent at the knees. Certain features may be exaggerated, and the head is almost always large in proportion to the body.

The surface of the carving will often have tribal marks carved or burnt into the blackened face and torso, and there may be crusty deposits of sacrificial material, even though such rituals are less often practised now. Sometimes the carving is highly polished or painted with ochre or imported enamel paint.

## BRONZE CASTING

West Africa’s best-known castings were created for the Kingdom of Benin in present-day Nigeria. Plaques, statues and masks were produced to decorate the palaces and compounds of the kings and chiefs, and their

*Tribal Arts of Africa*, by Jean-Baptiste Bacquart (the former head of Sotheby’s tribal arts section), combines superb photos with informative text about Africa’s (mostly) pre-colonial masks and statues.

The use of crosses in Tuareg culture (in jewellery and the shape of pommels on their camel saddles) led early European explorers to speculate that they were once Christians. The crosses are actually fashioned by Muslim blacksmiths who believe themselves to be of Jewish origin.

*African Art of the Dogon*, by Jean Laude, is a seminal 1970s’ text that explores the meaning of the highly ritualised art forms that distinguish one of West Africa’s most intriguing cultures.

discovery (and plundering) by Western governments and collectors did at least serve to challenge the prevailing view that African cultures were primitive.

West African brass and bronze is often cast using the *cire perdue* (lost wax) technique. The casting process involves creating a sculpture out of wax, which is then dipped in a solution of silt and mud. When the sculpture is dry, clay is built around the form to create a strong mould. The mould is then heated and the wax is melted out. Molten bronze is then poured into the empty mould and, when cool, the mould is broken away to reveal the bronze sculpture. Each cast is therefore unique. This process is thought to have produced the 1000-year-old beautifully intricate bronzes of the Ibo-Ikwu, which can be seen today in the National Museum in Lagos (p632). Today, latex is often used instead of wax, which creates even finer detail.

The Yoruba cast ritual staffs called *edan*. These comprise male and female figures in bronze, surmounting an iron tip and joined together by a chain. Figurative weights for weighing gold were cast by the Ashanti, and often symbolised the colourful proverbs for which those people are known.

The Guggenheim Museum's African collection is displayed in all its glory on its informative and visually enticing website: <http://artnetweb.com/guggenheim/africa/>.



# Peoples of West Africa

More than anything else, it is West Africa's people and the richness of their cultural traditions that lure travellers to the region and provide the highlight of any visit. The diversity you'll encounter is astounding; there are hundreds of different groups, each with their own customs and language.

Following are brief profiles of some of the larger or better-known groups (ordered alphabetically).

## ASHANTI

Inhabiting the heart of the now-thinning forest of southern Ghana are the Ashanti, whose kingdom was famed for its gold, its royalty and its traditional state organisation. As the political role of the state declined under colonial rule, a new source of wealth emerged. Cocoa underpinned the prosperity of town and village life, and traditional crafts such as stool carving, kente cloth weaving and goldsmithing continued to embellish the proud rituals and ceremonies of traditional life. Today, it is the aesthetic of traditional life and its chiefly ceremony that give Ashanti culture its appeal to the traveller. Some of the best-known African artefacts and symbols in Europe and North America are Ashanti, including kente cloth, carved stools and *Adinkra* symbols.

One of the most famous Ashanti war leaders against the British was Yaa Asantewaa, queen mother of Ejisu, who in 1900 shamed the Ashanti army into entering battle by leading them herself (see p384).

## BAMBARA

The Bambara (also known as Bamana) are the largest ethnic group in Mali, comprising about 33% of the population. Although they are Muslim, many have retained their traditional beliefs and customs. One of the most important of these is an occupational caste system, which includes farmers, leather-workers, poets and blacksmiths. Blacksmiths are particularly significant – not only do they make hoes for producing food, but also door locks that protect women and children, and guns that arm the village. All of these are furnished with spiritual power as well as utility. Door locks often have a water-lizard symbol to protect the house from thieves, or a long-eared creature similar to a bat that is said to hear every sound, thus protecting the household.

The Bambara are known for their artwork, especially woodcarvings and masks. Each of the occupational groups or castes has its own initiation rituals, for which particular masks are required, and it is only blacksmiths who inherit the capacity to tap into the spiritual power, or *nyama*, that enables them to transform wood and iron into masks and other religious objects. Because *nyama* is inherited, blacksmiths must marry within their own occupational group.

According to Bambara legend, the Creator sent an antelope to teach the Bambara how to cultivate grain, which is why the *chiwara*, a stylised antelope with long arched neck and horns, is the best-known symbol of the Bambara.

## BAOULÉ

The Baoulé, who separated from Ghana's Ashanti in bygone years, live in eastern and central Côte d'Ivoire. They are known for their belief in the *blolo* (meaning 'elsewhere' or 'the beyond') – another world, parallel to our own. The *blolo*, although invisible, is believed to be inhabited by people. A man may even have a *blolo bla*, a wife from beyond, and a woman a *blolo bian*, or other husband. Both can influence a partner's wellbeing, marital stability and sex life, usually negatively.

To counteract problems such as these, a soothsayer is called, who usually recommends that the *blolo* partner be 'called in' or 'brought down'

to prevent further havoc. This can be done either by moulding a cone of fine kaolin clay mixed with secret herbs, or by fashioning a clay or wooden statue of the *blolo* partner, thus controlling the parallel-world partner and limiting further damage.

## BOBO

The Bobo, who escaped subjugation by the Mossi, live in western Burkina Faso around Bobo-Dioulasso, although some also live across the border in Mali. They are renowned for their mask traditions, involving many different types of masks, including the famous butterfly and helmet masks.

The large horizontal butterfly masks are typically about 1.5m wide and painted red, black and white. They are worn during funeral rites, and when invoking the deity known as 'Do' in planting-time ceremonies asking for rain and a good harvest. The dancer twists his head so rapidly that the mask almost appears to be spinning. Other animals represented in Bobo masks include owls, buffaloes, antelopes, crocodiles and scorpions. The masks are usually tall, and have bold-coloured patterns similar to those adorning the butterfly masks.

## DAN

The Dan (also known as the Yacouba) inhabit the mountainous area around Man in Côte d'Ivoire. Masks are an important part of Dan culture. Each village has several great masks that represent its collective memory and which are glorified during times of happiness and abundance. Masks are regarded as divinities and as repositories of knowledge. They dictate the community values that give the clan cohesiveness and help to preserve its customs. For example, harvest-time yields, or whether a woman will give birth to a son or a daughter, are believed to depend on masks, and no important action is undertaken without first addressing a mask to request its assistance.

## DOGON

The Dogon, who live in the area around Mali's Falaise de Bandiagara (Bandiagara Escarpment), are among the region's most intriguing people, and are also known for their masks. There are various types, including the famous *iminana*, which can be up to 10m high, the bird-like *kanaga*, which protects against vengeance (of a killed animal), and the house-like *sirige*, which represents the house of the *hogon*, who is responsible for passing on Dogon traditions to younger generations. For more on the Dogon, see p517 and p516.

The Dogon are traditionally farmers. Both men and women are very industrious, as work is a central feature of Dogon society. Crops such as millet are planted in the fields below the escarpment and on terraces created on the lower slopes (where water and soil must be brought up from the plains below). In some areas dams have enabled the creation of irrigated market gardens on the solid rock of the plateau.

Unsurprisingly, many Dogon now choose to farm down on the plains, where traditionally there had been conflict with the Fula and Mossi. Now Fula groups bring their cattle to graze on harvested Dogon fields, thus providing fertiliser for the following year's crop.

## EWE

The Ewe people of Ghana and Togo are known for hard work, tidy villages, their love of education, their spirituality, and the power of their traditional shrines and priests. The supreme deities of the Ewe are Mawu-Lisa, the female-male moon-sun twins.

The Ewe are also known for their subtly coloured kente cloth and for their *vu gbe* (talking drums). The tonality of the Ewe spoken language and the rhythm of particular phrases and proverbs are combined in drumming to produce messages that range from the commonplace, which everyone understands, to a specialised repertoire known only to the master drummers. Drum language is used for communication, especially in times of crisis. It is also an integral part of religious song and dance. Ewe dances are widely appreciated for their fast and intricate movements, especially of the shoulders and feet. For more information on the Ewe, see p776.

## FULA

The Fula (also called Fulani, Peul or Foulbé in French-speaking countries) are tall, lightly-built people who have been settling across the West African savanna for centuries. They are estimated to number more than 12 million, and are found from Senegal to as far east as Cameroon, and sometimes beyond. The Tukolor (Toucouleur) and the Wolof of Senegal, as well as the Fulbe Jeeri of Mauritania, are all of Fula origin.

Although the Fula were originally nomadic cattle herders, many are now settled farmers, while others continue to follow their herds in search of pasture, living in grass huts resembling large beehives. Those Fula with no cattle of their own often work as herdsmen, looking after other peoples' cattle. Cattle occupy a central position in society, with Fula often putting the welfare of their animals above their own. Islam also plays a central role. Town-dwelling Fula (referred to as Fulani Gida in some areas) adopted Islam as early as the 12th century and were major catalysts in its spread.

The nomadic Fula, or Wodaabé, are known for their public initiation ceremony in which young boys are lashed with long rods to the accelerating rhythm of drums, as part of their passage into manhood. There are many onlookers, including potential brides, and the boys must show no fear, though their ordeal leaves them scarred. At the annual Gerewol festival (p613), where the young Wodaabé meet prospective marriage partners, men pay great attention to their appearance, adorning themselves with shining jewellery, feathers, sunglasses and elaborate make-up – anything to create an impression, and to look their best for the women.

## HAUSA

Hausaland extends over much of northern Nigeria (where the Hausa make up the largest ethnic group) and into Niger. Hausa culture is closely intertwined with Islam; you may see Quranic script, together with symbols of modern technology such as bicycles and aeroplanes, in the mud-relief patterns on house walls in the old quarters of Nigerian towns such as Kano and Zaria.

The emirs of the Hausa states are known for the pomp with which they live and travel. Their bodyguards traditionally wear chain mail, carry spears and ride strikingly caparisoned horses, while attendants on foot wear red turbans, and brilliant red and green robes. These days, however, it's more likely that you'll see an emir riding slowly through town in a large American car, with the horn sounding.

Many rural Hausa farm grains, cotton and groundnuts, and sacks of groundnuts stacked in pyramids are one of the distinctive sights of many Hausa markets.

Hausaland is one of the few places where cloth is dyed with natural indigo, and if you travel in this region, you'll probably see the drying cloths, patterned in shades of blue on blue, in contrast with the surrounding mud-red urban landscape.

The traditional Ewe institution of *Trokosi*, in which young girls are given as virtual slave-wives to priests in order to appease the spirits, has come under increasing criticism in recent years.

The Africa Guide website ([www.africaguide.com](http://www.africaguide.com)) has a great People and Culture section, which includes information on festivals, ceremonies and the traditions of various ethnic groups.

Traditionally, Hausa women rarely step from behind the walls of their compounds – many trade home-processed foods, crafts and other goods from home, while children are sent to run errands between compounds.

The form of a butterfly is used in Bobo masks because butterflies appear in great swarms immediately after the first rains and are thus associated with the planting season.

The Ethnologue website ([www.ethnologue.com](http://www.ethnologue.com)) is a comprehensive and fascinating database of the world's languages, listing the languages, the linguistic families to which they belong and the number of speakers in each country.

A Dogon man must spend time working hard in fields belonging to his intended wife's parents before permission to marry will be granted.

## IGBO

The Igbo (also known as Ibo) occupy a large, densely settled farming area in southeastern Nigeria. They form Nigeria's third-largest ethnic group, are predominantly Christian, and have a reputation for hard work, ambition and a love of education. Traditional-minded Igbo will not eat the new season's yam until Ikeji, the annual new yam festival, when thanks are given to the gods for a productive year. The most important Ikeji festival takes place in September at Arochukuwu. Judges select the best village presentation of dance, parade and music.

An Igbo receives his destiny or *chi* directly from Chukwu, the benign god of creation. At death, a person returns his *chi* and joins the world of ancestors and spirits. From this spirit world, the deceased watches over living descendants, perhaps returning one day with a different *chi*. A traditionalist's daily preoccupation is to please and appease the *alusa* – the lesser spirits who can blight a person's life if offended and bestow rewards if pleased.

## LOBI

The Lobi live in southwestern Burkina Faso, as well as northern Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, in distinctive mud-brick compounds resembling small fortresses. They follow ancestor-based beliefs and their traditions are very well preserved.

The Lobi don't use masks. Most of their woodcarvings are of human figures, typically 35cm to 65cm high, which represent deities and ancestors. The woodcarvings are used for ancestral shrines, and traditionally were found in every home. The Lobi also carve staffs and three-legged stools with human or animal heads, as well as combs with human figures or geometric decorations. Lobi carvings are distinguished by their rigid appearance, with arms generally positioned straight down, along the sides of the body. They are also notable for their realistic and detailed renderings of certain body parts, particularly the navel, eyes and hair.

## MALINKÉ

The Malinké (in some areas synonymous with, or closely related to, the Mandinka or Mandingo) are part of the larger Mande group, which also includes the Bambara and the Soninké and is believed to have originated as early as 4000 years ago. It was at this time that various agricultural peoples of the southern Sahara merged with the indigenous hunter-gatherers of the Niger River basin. Today, the Malinké are found in southern Mali as well as northern Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal and Gambia. They are famed hunters and warriors, and were prominent converts to Islam from around the 11th century. In the mid-13th century the Malinké founded the powerful Empire of Mali. Thanks to their central position, they were able to control almost all trans-Saharan commerce – from the gold trade on the coast to the commodities trade coming south across the desert from the Mediterranean states.

Originally the Malinké were divided into 12 clans, each with its own king and highly stratified castes. The heads of these 12 clans formed a royal council, which elected a single leader, known as a *mansa*. The traditional hunter societies of the Malinké, with their secret initiation rites, still thrive today.

## MOSSI

The Mossi, who are concentrated in the central plateau area in and around Ouagadougou, are the largest ethnic group in Burkina Faso. In the 14th century they established powerful kingdoms in this area after

In Igbo tradition, those who died a bad death (such as in childbirth or suicide) were denied proper burial and entry into the realm of the ancestors. Instead, they were thrown into the forest where they became harmful wandering ghosts.

*Faces of Africa*, by Carol Beckwith and Angela Fisher, is a stunning coffee-table book of photos of people from different ethnic groups, by the two photographers who've done more than anyone to bring African cultures to the world.

*Lords of the Savanna: The Bambara, Fulani, Igbo, Mossi and Nupe*, by Philip Koslow, is aimed at young teenagers, but adults will also learn a thing or two from the simply told histories of West Africa's more populous peoples.

### WHAT WAS YOUR NAME AGAIN?

One result of the European language influence in West Africa is that the same African word or sound may be spelt differently according to the interpretation of the original colonial recorder. Travelling through the region, you'll soon realise that many groups of people have more than one name.

The Jola people in Gambia (a former British colony) spread over the border into Senegal (a former French colony), where they are known as the Diola. The Fula people, who are spread across much of northern West Africa, were identified by the French as Peul and by the English as Fulani, the former being the singular and the latter the plural of the word used by these people to identify themselves. Their language is known as Fula or Pulaar.

Similarly, spellings of names can vary, either according to the language of the country's original colonial power, or as linguistic studies become more phonetically precise. For example, Peul can be spelt Peulh; Tamashék (the language of the Tuareg) is generally spelt Tamachek by French speakers; and the Toucouleur of northern Senegal are now often called the Tukolor.

To add to the confusion, the definitions of ethnic groups don't always correlate with those of language groups. Usually a common tongue is the most fundamental aspect that links people together, but linguists and anthropologists sometimes classify as a single ethnic group several subgroups (or sub-subgroups) which speak mutually unintelligible languages, even though they share a common root. Thus the Malinké people of Senegal and Guinea and the Mandinka people of Gambia are sometimes regarded as the same ethnic group. Linguists, however, point out that their languages differ in significant ways and therefore the two peoples should be categorised separately – even though their languages are both part of the wider Manding language group. Both the Malinké and the Mandinka are also sometimes called the Mandingo.

leaving their original homeland around the Niger River. The Mossi are known for their rigid social hierarchies and elaborate rituals, and they still exert considerable political influence in Burkina Faso today. Historically, they resisted invasion by the Muslim Empire of Mali, and today many continue to follow traditional beliefs.

Artistically, the Mossi are best known for their tall wooden antelope masks, often more than 2m high and painted red and white. Male and female antelope masks are distinguished from each other by their top sections. Female masks feature a human female figure, while male masks consist of a nonhuman plank-like structure. At the bottom of these masks is a small oval face, bisected by a serrated vertical strip, with triangular eyeholes on either side. The masks were worn primarily at funerals.

## SENOUFO

The Senoufo, who live in Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso and Mali, are renowned as skilled farmers. Animals are held in high regard in Senoufo culture, and when someone dies it is believed that they are transformed into the clan's animal totem.

As a result, many Senoufo dances are associated with animals. One of these is the dance of the leopard men, which is performed in Natiokabardara, near Korhogo, as well as in other Senoufo areas when young boys return from their Poro (part of the secret Lô association) initiation-training sessions. In this and other dances, masks – often of animal heads – are instrumental in making contact with the gods and driving away bad spirits.

When someone dies in traditional Senoufo society, the corpse is carried through the village in a procession, while men in grotesque masks chase away the soul. It is the blacksmiths who dig the grave and place the corpse inside, after which they present a last meal to the deceased, and then feast and celebrate.

Blacksmiths are believed to possess special powers in many West African societies (especially Bambara, Senoufo, Tuareg and Wolof), in part because their relationship with iron and fire renders them immune to evil spirits.

## SONGHAÏ

The Songhai live predominantly in Niger (where they are the fourth-largest grouping) and in northern Mali, between Timbuktu and Gao. Historically they trace their roots back to the 7th or 8th century, when Aliman Za (or Dia) arrived at the upper Niger River from Mandinka (Malinké) lands further west and forced out the local fisherpeople. Other theories claim that it was the Tuareg that founded the original Songhai state, while yet another hypothesis states that the ancestors of the Songhai were the original inhabitants of the Upper Niger. The truth is probably a mixture of all three theories, but in any case, it's generally agreed that the Songhai are of Nilo-Saharan stock. Some Songhai make a distinction between the Songhai of Gao (supposedly of pure blood) and those of Timbuktu (who have mixed with Tuareg and Moors).

Songhai villages are divided into neighbourhoods, each of which elects a head. These heads then come together to elect a village chief, who typically is of noble descent. Most Songhai consider themselves Muslim, although their religious practices are often mixed with strong traditional elements, including ancestor worship and witchcraft. Large communities often have both a mosque as well as a *troupe* that specialises in mediums for spirit intervention.

Songhai are traditionally farmers, who often have strong bonds with their Tuareg neighbours. There is even an affectionate term in the Songhai language that refers to the nomadic Tuareg as 'our Tuareg'.

## TUAREG

The Tuareg are a nomadic, camel-owning people, who traditionally roamed across the Sahara from Mauritania to western Sudan. Although originally the Tuareg were a Berber group from North Africa (their language, Tamashek, has Berber roots), who migrated to the desert after the Arab-Islamic invasions of the 7th and 11th centuries. In recent times they have had to abandon their traditional way of life, primarily because of droughts, and many of the Tuareg have moved southwards to settle near cities.

The Tuareg traditionally follow a rigid status system, with nobles, blacksmiths and slaves all occupying strictly delineated hierarchical positions, although the importance of caste identity has diminished in recent years.

The veils, or *taguelmoust*, that are the symbols of a Tuareg's identity and extend from a man's turban, are both a source of protection against the desert wind and sand, and a social requirement; it is considered improper for a Tuareg man to show his face to a man of higher status. Traditionally, Tuareg men rarely remove their shawl to expose the lower half of the face in company and, when drinking tea, pass the glass under their *taguelmoust* so as not to reveal the mouth.

Tuareg women – who are not veiled and who enjoy an unusual degree of independence – weave artificial strands into their plaits and attach cowrie shells. They also can be recognised by their large pieces of silver jewellery.

The *croix d'Agadez* is one of the best-known Tuareg symbols, together with intricately decorated dagger handles. The crosses are in silver filigree, and the Tuareg believe they are powerful talismans offering protection against 'the evil eye'; some serve as fertility symbols. The designs vary slightly, depending on which desert town they were made in. Tuareg men use the crosses as a form of currency to buy cattle; between trades the crosses are worn by Tuareg wives as a sign of wealth.

*Niger: Epopées Zarma Et Songhay*, by Jibo Baje – a Songhai griot from Niger who sings the epic tales of his people in the ancient Songhai language, accompanied by a three-stringed lute – is strangely mesmerizing.

*The Pastoral Tuareg: Ecology, Culture, and Society*, by Johannes and Ida Nicolaisen, is a comprehensive two-volume study of the Tuareg with good photographs. Subjects range from traditions to the challenges faced by the Tuareg today.

## WOLOF

The Wolof heartland is in Senegal, where these people comprise about 36% of the population, and are active in the Muslim brotherhoods.

Wolof society is hierarchical, with hereditary castes determining traditional occupations and status. Today, though, family status is only important for marriage and traditional occupations, such as blacksmiths and *griots* (praise singers).

Although Islam has been an influence in Wolof areas since the 11th century, many traditional beliefs persist. For example, there is a belief in a snake monster so terrible that to look upon it causes death. In order to guard against witches and other forms of evil, many Wolof wear leather-bound amulets containing written verses of the Qur'an.

The Wolof, who are of Fula origin, tend to be tall and striking in their traditional flowing robes of white, dark blue or black. The women wear a series of loose, layered gowns, each a little shorter than the one underneath. Men wear long gowns over loose white pantaloons that overhang the knee.

## YORUBA

Yorubaland extends from southwestern Nigeria to neighbouring Benin. Most Yoruba traditionally prefer to live in towns, migrating seasonally to their more-distant farmlands. The urban culture of the Yoruba has facilitated the development of trade and elaborate arts, including the famous Benin bronzes. The old quarters of Yoruba cities contain large household compounds of extended families. Every town has an *oba* (crowned chief). The traditional head of all Yorubas is the *alafin*, who lives at Oyo, in Nigeria, while the *oni* (chief priest) lives at Ife. Formality, ceremony and hierarchy govern Yoruba social relations, and ostentation in dress and jewellery is a social requirement for women at traditional functions.

*Folktales from the Gambia: Wolof Fictional Narratives*, by Emil A Magel, offers revealing insights into the Wolof people through the medium of traditional stories, which are as enjoyable for adults as for children.

*The Religion of the Yorubas*, by Olumide Lucas, gives the detailed story behind the spirit world of the Yoruba – it can be a little dry in places but there's no finer text on this fascinating people.



# Environment

West Africa spans some of the great landscapes of the African continent, with lush, tropical rainforests yielding to savanna before the Sahel provides an introduction to the Sahara. With such a rich environmental bounty at its disposal (and also at the disposal of a resource-hungry world), West Africa is facing some of the most pressing environmental issues of our time in a territory where the world's poorest people and most rapidly diminishing wildlife scratch about in the dust for the means to survive.

For more information on travelling responsibly throughout the region, see p22.

## THE LAND

The geography of West Africa is a story of three horizontal lines: a northern band of desert, a southern band of woodland and forest, and a semidesert zone in between known as the Sahel (see opposite).

West Africa largely consists of a gently undulating plateau and has very few mountains. However, there are some important highland areas in the region: the borderlands between Nigeria and Cameroon rise to Chappal Wadi (2418m); the Jos Plateau (1781m) and Shebsi Mountains (2418m) are in Nigeria; Mt Bintumani (1945m) in Sierra Leone; the rocky Air Mountains in Niger, rising to Mt Bagzane (2022m); the hill country around Mt Nimba (1752m), in the border area between Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire and Liberia; and the hills of the Fouta Djallon in western Guinea (1538m), which extends down into southeastern Senegal. The peaks of the volcanic Cape Verde islands are also notable with the highest one being Mt Fogo (2839m). Mt Cameroon (4095m) is the highest point in West Africa.

Although West Africa's highland areas are limited, they create headwaters for several rivers, including the Niger (see the boxed text, p82). Other major rivers include the Senegal River, which forms the border with Mauritania; the Gambia River, again giving its name to the country it flows through; the Casamance River in southern Senegal; the Volta River in Ghana and Burkina Faso; and the Benue River (a major tributary of the Niger) in Nigeria and Cameroon.

## THE HARMATTAN – SCOURGE OF THE SAHEL?

Harmattan (from a Hausa word meaning 'north wind') refers to the dry, dust-laden winds that originate in the Sahara and blow throughout much of West Africa during the dry season, January (sometimes December) to March. The harmattan can cause respiratory complaints, spread diseases such as meningitis, and reduce visibility to a few hundred metres, often cloaking the landscape in a spectral orange glow. Aircraft delays are commonplace during the harmattan and photographs taken on hazy days will often have a disappointingly overcast and colourless hue. Even when the wind stops blowing, conditions often remain hazy until the first May rains.

But the harmattan is not just a bearer of bad tidings. Some locals look forward to the harmattan season as a cooler respite from the searing heat, and also as a signal that the year has turned the corner towards the rainy season. In many of the countries, the peak tourist period coincides with the harmattan's arrival and some travellers even await the harmattan with relish – most notably the decidedly singular late-18th-century explorer Mungo Park, who welcomed the wind as a curer of all ills and proclaimed it to be definitely the best time to travel in West Africa.

*The Sahara* (part of the *World's Wild Places* series by Time-Life Books) captures the lure of the Sahara with its evocative prose, but is also hugely informative; it'll have you dreaming of a desert campfire.

The Sahara covers more than nine million sq km (approximately the size of the United States) but is home to just 1400 plant species, 50 species of mammals and 18 species of birds.

## THE SAHEL

The Sahel – a horizontal band stretching from the Atlantic coast to the Nile – is the transition zone between the forested lands of the south and the Sahara desert to the north, but for its detractors it possesses the redeeming features of neither. At face value, the Sahel is indeed one of the direst stretches of inhabited geography on earth, beset by drought, erosion, creeping desertification, periodic locust invasions and increasingly infertile land.

That said, within its boundaries are many different subregions. Among these are zones which are variously described as semidesert savanna, Guinea savanna, Sudanese savanna, dry savanna or dry woodland savanna. In the north, near the true desert, the Sahel is dry, dusty, sparsely vegetated and barely distinguishable from the Sahara, but in the south, nearer the forests, it is greener and contains areas of light woodland fed by more plentiful rains.

The countries covered in this book that are considered to be all or partly in the Sahel are Senegal, Gambia, Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Nigeria. However, the boundaries are not fixed, and southern Nigeria and southeastern Guinea are actually in the forest zone. In the same way, the northern parts of the coastal countries of Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, Benin and Cameroon are relatively dry, and so are sometimes described as having a Sahelian climate or vegetation.

If West Africa is overshadowed by the looming Sahara desert to the north, it is barricaded by the equally formidable Atlantic Ocean to the south. Many major cities – Dakar, Banjul, Bissau, Conakry, Freetown, Monrovia, Abidjan, Accra, Lomé, Cotonou, Porto Novo, Lagos and Douala – are strung out along the coast like beads in a chain, in some areas forming an almost constant linear urban sprawl, cut only by national frontiers.

## WILDLIFE Animals MAMMALS

Although West Africa comes a distant third behind East and Southern Africa when it comes to wildlife viewing, it's still home to an impressive variety of animals. Some of the region's national parks (see p85) contain classic African mammal species – including elephants, lions and leopards – but your chances of seeing them are much smaller than elsewhere in Africa. There are also significant wildlife populations, including elephants, in rainforest areas, although animals are generally hidden by the dense vegetation. Another problem is that, unlike East African mammals which are accustomed to large-scale safari tourism, West Africa's species are much more wary of humans.

Mammals more readily seen include several beautiful antelope species, such as bushbucks, reedbucks, waterbucks, kobs, roans, elands, oribis, sitatungas and various gazelles and duikers. The Sahel-dwelling dama gazelle is the largest gazelle species in Africa, but is now close to extinction, as its grazing lands have been taken over by cattle and reduced by desertification. Wild pig species include giant hogs and bush pigs (the West African species is often called the red river hog), which inhabit forest areas, and warthogs, frequently seen in drier savanna areas. Buffaloes in West Africa inhabit forest regions, and are smaller and redder than the East African version.

Possibly the best-known and most easily observed mammals of West Africa are monkeys. These include several types of colobus and green or vervet monkeys. Other primates include mangabeyes, baboons, galagos (bushbabies), as well as chimpanzees and the rare and endangered drill.

In the Niger Inland Delta in Mali, the fisherpeople of the Bozo are known in Bambara as *gui-tigui*, the 'Masters of the River', and are believed to possess a mystical affinity with the river and its creatures.

*African Silences*, by Peter Matthiessen, is a profoundly moving, beautifully written book about surveying wildlife in West and Central Africa.

### THE NIGER RIVER

The Niger River is one of Africa's grand old rivers and its curious course has fascinated travellers since the 18th century. Africa's third-longest river, the Niger begins its journey just over 200km from the Atlantic, but then flows for over 4100km in its search for an outlet to the sea. From its source in the Fouta Djallon highlands of Guinea, close to the border with Sierra Leone, the Niger flows deep into Africa's heart, passing Bamako and Mopti and on through the vast Niger Inland Delta and Lac Debo of central Mali. From there, the Niger narrows and comes within touching distance of Timbuktu before it comes up against the impenetrable barrier of the Sahara, from which it turns its face away, as if unable to bear the solitude. In its attempts to avoid the desert, it performs a long, laborious curve south (which is known as the Niger Bend or Boucle du Niger) and courses down into Niger, then crosses a slice of Benin before finally emptying into the Atlantic via a maze of swamps and channels (in Nigeria, west of Port Harcourt) called the Niger Delta.

Until the intrepid Mungo Park reached the Niger River close to Ségou on 21 July 1796, European mapmakers were convinced that the river flowed east–west and originated in the Nile or Lake Chad.

Cameroon also hosts an endangered population of western lowland gorilla.

In the rivers, including the upper reaches of the Niger and Gambia Rivers, hippos can sometimes be seen, but numbers are low. Some hippos have adapted to live in salt water and exist in coastal areas, while a few forest areas of West Africa, including in Liberia, are home to very small populations of pygmy hippos, which are less aquatic than their larger cousins.

Other marine mammals found in the region include dolphins, especially where the region's main rivers meet the ocean, and manatees (sea cows) – giant seal-like relatives of the elephant that inhabit mangrove and delta areas along the coast.

### BIRDS

West Africa is a world-class birding destination, with more than 1000 species recorded. Many are endemic, others are passing migrants, flying down the Atlantic coast to and from their wintering grounds, while some are African nomads moving within the continent in pursuit of seasons of plenty. Among those you're likely to see are flamingos, storks and pelicans (around waterways), beautiful gannets and fish-eating cormorants (in coastal areas), turacos – including the striking violet turaco – and African grey and red-billed hornbills.

One of West Africa's best bird-watching destinations is tiny Gambia, with more than 560 species recorded and several easily accessed bird-watching sites. Abuko Nature Reserve (p315) is closest to Banjul and hosts a surprising diversity of birds, especially forest species. Tanji Bird Reserve (p313), on the Atlantic coast, protects a patchwork of habitat on the flyway for migrating birds. Although it covers only 600 hectares, close to 300 species have been recorded here. Kiang West National Park (p319), one of the country's largest protected areas, is also good.

Senegal also offers excellent birding, particularly in Parc National de la Langue de Barbarie (p717) and Parc National des Oiseaux du Djoudj (p717). Both are famous for vast pelican and flamingo flocks, and Djoudj is a Unesco World Heritage site, where almost 400 bird species have been recorded. In Parc National du Niokolo-Koba (p721), also a World Heritage Site, about 350 bird species have been recorded. There are several other good sites in northern Casamance near Kafountine (p735).

Mali is an underrated birding destination with more than 655 recorded species. In the Niger Inland Delta (see the boxed text, p510), Egyptian plovers, hammerkops (which make an enormous nest), jaçanas (lily trot-

African Birdclub ([www.africanbirdclub.org](http://www.africanbirdclub.org)) is ideal for those who love their birds, with plenty of interesting reading and West African bird-watching links.

ters), pied kingfishers, cattle egrets and majestic crowned cranes can be seen year-round, but February is the best time to visit, when overwintering species such as greenshanks, black-winged stilts, marbled teal and ferruginous duck are resident. The sandstone cliffs of the Falaise de Bandiagara (see p513) are good for large raptors, while in the wooden savanna at the base are Abyssinian and blue-bellied rollers among others.

In Ghana's Mole National Park (p389) more than 300 species have been recorded, while Nigeria's Yankari National Park (p655) has a stunning array of about 600 species and the Hadejia-Nguru Wetlands (p628), 200km northeast of Kano, is an important resting place for migratory birds and endemic species.

Public access to Mauritania's remote Parc National du Banc d'Arguin (p561) may be restricted during the breeding season, but it's a busy crossroads for birds migrating between Europe and Southern Africa.

Sierra Leone's Tiwai Island Wildlife Sanctuary (p763) is again safe to visit and hosts more than 120 bird species, including hornbills, kingfishers and the rare white-breasted guinea fowl. Around Mt Bintumani (p767), the endangered rufous fishing-owl has been sighted, while Outamba-Kilimi National Park (p766) supports kingfishers, hornbills, herons, hawks and the spectacular great blue turaco.

In Cameroon, the lushly vegetated Korup National Park (p195) has more than 300 species.

### REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS

West Africa's most notable reptile is the Nile crocodile, which was once abundant all over the region. Hunting and habitat destruction has taken its toll, however, and few remain. Your best chance to see them is along

*Birds of West Africa*, by W Serle, is a must for birders who want to know what species are present and where you're most likely to see them.

It is estimated that 5000 million birds from Europe and Asia migrate to tropical Africa every year, a journey of up to 11,000km – less than half make it home, either dying en route or preferring to remain in Africa.

### SOME CURIOUS RELICS AND WHERE TO SEE THEM

The Sahara desert and the Sahel were once lands of lakes, rivers, rolling savanna and abundant water and wildlife. Giraffes, elephants, leopards, wildebeest and lions once roamed far into North Africa. When the Sahara began to dry out and turn to desert 6000 years ago, the larger mammals died out or retreated south. Elsewhere, wildlife in more fertile areas has been driven to the brink of extinction by hunting, human encroachment, habitat destruction, poaching and the trade in bush meat. Just a few pockets remain, including the following:

**Chimpanzees & gorillas** (p215) Remote and difficult to reach, the rainforests around Lobéké in southeastern Cameroon have nonetheless been discovered by commercial loggers; gorillas and chimpanzees are considered at particular risk.

**Giraffes of Kouré** (p594) Decimated by road accidents and by a government who, in 1996, shot a dozen of them as gifts for friendly foreign leaders, the last giraffes in the West African wild number less than 100.

**Hippos, manatees and red-fronted gazelles** (p533) The Réserve d'Ansongo-Ménaka is next to the Niger River in an isolated corner of Mali near Gao. Much of the wildlife has gone, but you can still see red-fronted gazelles, manatees and hippos.

**Mali's desert elephants** (p534) Mali's desert elephants are long-legged and short-tusked, and migrate according to the season through the Gourma region between the Niger River and the border with Burkina Faso.

**Monk seals** (p560) Possibly the world's last colony of monk seals survives along Mauritania's remote Atlantic Coast.

**Olive trees, olive baboons and spurred tortoises** (p608) The remote Air Mountains of northern Niger have a remarkable array of species, including thousand-year-old Mediterranean wild olive trees, a stranded population of about 70 olive baboons and the Sahara's only amphibian, the African spurred tortoise.

**Rescued primates** (p189) At the Limbe Wildlife Centre in Cameroon, you'll find a hugely impressive project to rescue and rehabilitate chimpanzees, gorillas, drills and other primates. Other similar projects are run at Bêlabo (p214) and Calabar Nigeria (p649).

**WILD WILDLIFE**

If you set out in search of wildlife, remember that West Africa's wildlife is just that – wild. *Always* keep a healthy distance between you and any elephant, lion, rhino or other wild animal that you may be lucky enough to encounter. *Never* get between a mother and her calves or cubs, and invest in a telephoto lens instead of approaching an animal at close range. On safaris, heed the advice of your guide, and respect park regulations, especially those that require you to stay in a vehicle. Exercise care when boating or swimming, and be particularly aware of the dangers posed by crocodiles and hippos.

the larger rivers such as the Gambia, Senegal and Niger. Two lesser-known species, the dwarf crocodile and slender-nosed crocodile, also occur.

Turtles survive along the coast of West Africa and on some of the offshore islands. The females come to the beaches to lay eggs in the sand, sometimes several hundred at a time. The threats faced by turtles are considerable, and include damage by humans to nesting areas, hunting, and the effects of water pollution – turtles often mistake floating plastic bags for food.

West Africa has a full complement of both venomous and harmless snakes, but most fear humans and you'd be 'lucky' to even see one. The largest snake is the nonvenomous python, which grows to more than 5m in length. It kills by coiling around and suffocating its prey – not the nicest way to go, but fortunately it doesn't usually fancy humans. The venomous puff adder, which reaches about 1m in length and enjoys sunning itself, isn't aggressive but, being very slow, it's sometimes stepped on by unwary people before it has had time to wake up and move out of the way. When stepped on, it bites. Take special care when hiking in bush areas, especially in the early morning when this snake is at its most lethargic.

Lizards are ubiquitous in West Africa, from the desert to the rainforest and from the bathroom ceiling to the kitchen sink. The largest of these is the monitor (up to 2m in length), which spends a lot of time lying around rivers and water holes, perhaps dreaming of being a crocodile. You're more likely to see agama – lizards about 20cm long with purple bodies and orange heads, energetically doing press-ups on walls and boulders. And in any house or small hotel you'll inevitably see geckos running around on the walls or hiding behind pictures, with their sucker-like feet and near-transparent skin. They can appear alarming, but they're your friends – they love to eat mosquitoes. Other insect-eaters include frogs, which inhabit riverside reeds and mangroves, and toads, which are happier out of water than their froggy relatives.

**Plants****FOREST & WOODLAND**

Much of West Africa's coastal area is between 5 and 10 degrees north of the equator, where rainfall is heavy. Dense rain-fed lowland forest (or just 'rainforest') contains trees which can reach heights of 45m. The upper branches form a continuous canopy, blocking light from the forest floor, which hinders the growth of smaller plants, although vines flourish.

Forests or dense woodland can only be found in parts of Liberia, Sierra Leone, southwestern Côte d'Ivoire and southern and eastern Cameroon. Smaller areas of woodland exist in Benin, Ghana, Guinea, Nigeria and Togo.

An especially rich bounty of rainforests, set amid volcanic mountains, straddles the border between Nigeria and Cameroon. In 2005

British scientists from the Royal Botanic Gardens in Kew surveyed over 2400 plant species in this Kupe-Bakossi region, with 10% of them completely new to science (for more information see p177). In the east, Cameroon's rainforests connect West Africa to the vast Congo Basin in Central Africa.

**SAVANNA & SEMIDESERT**

In the northern parts of the coastal countries the climate is drier, and forest and woodland yield to savanna and semidesert. Here, the landscape consists primarily of well-dispersed trees, especially acacia, and low scrub bush, although ribbons of dense gallery forest occur along river courses. Gallery forest is similar to rainforest but is fed by ground water rather than rain, so many of the vines characteristic of rainforest are absent.

**DESERT**

North of the Sahel is the true desert (which engulfs northern Mali and Niger, plus most of Mauritania), where rainfall and vegetation growth are minimal. Apart from desert grasses and small flowers, which can carpet the desert in colour after rains (even after having lain dormant for years), the most striking plant is the *Calotropis procera*, otherwise known as the Apple of Sodom. Its prolific (but poisonous) green leaves should be no invitation to taste. Wild colocynth melons (think watermelons in the sand) produce brittle, gourd-like fruits that burst open in the sun and scatter their seeds on the wind, but should not be eaten.

**NATIONAL PARKS**

Most of West Africa's national parks are either remote (such as the parks of southeastern Cameroon), not particularly well set up for tourists, or inaccessible by public transport. This often means that a serious and

*Sahara: A Natural History*, by Marq de Villiers and Sheila Hirtle, covers the natural and human history of the Sahara like no other recent book, and the lively text makes it a pleasure to read.

**THE BAOBAB TREE – KING OF THE AFRICAN BUSH**

There is nothing quite like the baobab (*Adansonia digitata*), whose thick, sturdy trunk and stunted root-like branches are an instantly recognisable symbol of Africa. So otherworldly and utterly distinctive is the baobab, that many traditional cultures believe that the tree displeased a deity who promptly plucked it in anger and thrust it back into the ground upside down – hence the root-like branches. Or as that great writer on Africa, Ryszard Kapuściński, wrote: 'Like elephants among other animals, so are baobabs among trees: they have no equals.'

Despite the apparent misdemeanours of its ancestor, today's baobab is revered by local people. Its wizened appearance, combined with an ability to survive great droughts and live for many hundreds of years, ensures that the baobab is believed to possess magical powers. Old trees often develop cavities, which are sometimes used to inter a revered griot.

Another reason why the baobab occupies such an important position in local life is that they grow in savanna zones, where rainfall is limited. The baobab can be found in most parts of West Africa, not to mention many other areas of the continent, and serves a variety of practical, often essential, purposes. The hollow trunk sometimes holds rainwater, making it a useful reservoir in times of drought. The tree's large pods (which resemble pendulous Christmas decorations and are sometimes called 'monkey bread') contain seeds encased in a sherbet-like substance that can be eaten or made into a juice-like drink. The pods themselves are used to make cups or bowls (often for drinking palm wine) and as fuel; they burn slowly and are especially good for smoking fish. The leaves of the baobab can be eaten when chopped, boiled and made into a sauce; they can also be dried and ground into a paste to use as a poultice for skin infections and joint complaints. Even the flowers are used as decoration at ceremonies.

In several countries, including Mali, Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire, crocodiles are regarded as sacred, and although travellers must take care, locals believe that the crocodiles recognise villagers and would never attack them.

*Seeds of Famine*, by Richard Franke and Barbara Chasin, is as dry as the Sahel dust, but essential reading for anyone keen to learn more about the connection between colonial policies and the droughts that still face the region.

### WEST AFRICA'S TOP FIVE NATIONAL PARKS

- Parc National de Waza (p213) In Cameroon, this is one of the best and most accessible parks of the region, and home to elephants, hippos, giraffes and lions.
- Parc Regional du W (p596) Straddles the three countries of Niger, Benin and Burkina Faso, and takes its name from the shape of the Niger River. This fine park has leopards, lions, cheetahs, elephants, baboons, Nile crocodiles and hyenas, plus over 300 bird and 500 plant species.
- Parc National de la Pendjari (p118) Elephants, leopards, buffaloes, hippos and lions are the main attractions at this well-organised park in Benin. The national park is only open from mid-December to mid-May.
- Mole National Park (p389) Ghana's best park boasts elephants, olive baboons, and 90 other mammal and 300 bird species.
- Yankari National Park (p655) Home to 600 elephants (one of the largest populations in West Africa), this excellent Nigerian park also has bushbucks, waterbucks, lions, hippos, monkeys and crocs.

expensive expedition is required to indulge your passion for wildlife. Once there, walking safaris, as found in East and Southern Africa, are virtually unheard of. On the plus side, once you've made the effort to get there, you may have a national park to yourself.

The peak viewing months are invariably from March to early May when water is scarce and animals congregate at watering holes. For information about specific national parks see the individual country chapters, but following are five which stand out and are not too far off the beaten track.

### ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

There's no way to put this politely – West Africa is one of the world's environmental basket cases, with rampant deforestation and uncontrolled logging, desertification, soil erosion, air and water degradation, urban encroachment, and habitat and wildlife destruction.

Deforestation is the most visible problem, with just a tiny fraction of West Africa's original forest cover remaining. The extent of the problem is evident from the causes – increased population growth, commercial logging, clearing of trees for farming and slash-and-burn farming techniques – the effects of most of which are either irreversible or require massive investment from impoverished governments. Even assuming the best political will in the world, meagre government resources and aid funds are, understandably, directed to more pressing human needs, with long-term environmental protection seen as a luxury few can afford, even as such policies of short-term necessity merely serve to make the region more vulnerable to famine in the future. Potential earnings in global timber markets, for example, are infinitely more attractive (and lucrative) than preserving wildlife for the trickle of tourists who come to see it. Deforestation is particularly acute in Côte d'Ivoire; see p264 for more.

The results of deforestation can be devastating – many bird and animal species lose vital habitats, local human populations lose their lifeblood, soil erosion sets in, fewer areas are cultivable, water catchments are reduced, and the availability of traditional building materials, foodstuffs and medicines is decreased. In Cameroon, especially, the incursion of humans ever deeper into the forest is fuelling the trade in bush meat, which is exacting a terrible price on the country's wildlife.

*Sahel: The End of the Road*, by Sebastião Salgado, is a grim photographic journey across the Sahel during the 1984–85 drought by one of the world's best photographers, who's adept at capturing people in the landscape they call home.

Sahara Conservation Fund ([www.saharacconservation.org](http://www.saharacconservation.org)) is one of few sources of information on the wildlife of the Sahara, and the efforts being undertaken to protect it.

Fortunately, it's not all bad news. In Cameroon and Liberia (home to about 40% of the last remaining 'Upper Guinean' rainforest that once stretched from Sierra Leone eastward to Ghana), several international environmental organisations have pledged resources to help improve forestry and environmental management.

### Global Links

West Africans are often blamed for the destruction of their own environment, but the reality is far more complex. Many of the problems began in colonial times, when farmers were encouraged to plant thirsty cash crops (such as the peanut) that require intensive farming – traditional methods involved fallow periods, which allowed the soil to regenerate. Thus deprived of essential nutrients, the soil required fertilisers to recover, but these were often too expensive for poor farmers to afford. The soil began to unravel.

This process was exacerbated by well-intentioned animal husbandry and well-building schemes funded by the European Union (EU) in the 1960s and '70s, which helped to increase herd sizes without any accompanying growth in pasturelands. In the absence of fodder, the additional cattle and goats ate the grasses and thorns that bound the soil together.

*Squandering Eden*, by Mort Rosenblum and Doug Williamson, is a highly readable, scathing indictment of Western aid policies in Africa, and their impact on the environment (sadly, little has changed since it was written in 1987).

### COMMUNITY-BASED CONSERVATION – SOME SUCCESSES

Sustainable environmental protection usually works only by involving local communities and providing them with the material benefits (tourism, sustainability of resources for future generations) which derive from preserving pristine environments. For those who live hand-to-mouth, as many do in West Africa, long-term planning is often impossible and the pretty forests that Westerners are desperate to protect are actually a necessary and time-honoured resource for locals.

Several forestry projects in Gambia, for example, recognise this delicate balance, fusing environmental protection with traditional sources of livelihood. Natural woodland areas are not simply fenced off, but rather used in a sustainable way for the benefit of local communities, with the emphasis on sustainable resource management. In Gambia's Kiang West National Park, limited cattle grazing and (more controversially) rice cultivation is permitted in the park. Dead wood can be used for timber, fruits and edible leaves can be collected, and grasses can be harvested for thatch. These products can be used or sold, but all activities take place without destroying the growing trees. In this way, local people view the forest as a source of produce, income or employment, and have a real incentive to protect it in the long term. Local inhabitants also take a leading role in environmental planning – at Niimi National Park, also in Gambia, community groups have been established to give local people a formal voice in the park's management structure.

The Gambian government has also identified key areas of ecological importance as potential sites for ecotourism projects. In Côte d'Ivoire, a similar approach protects one of West Africa's largest stands of rainforest in Parc National de Taï. Thanks to the efforts of a village tourism project, forest clearing and poaching have decreased significantly, although the conflict in Côte d'Ivoire is threatening to undo all the good work.

In Burkina Faso, small-scale NGO projects encourage farmers to return to traditional methods of cultivation, in particular the laying of *diguettes* or stone lines along field contours, which slow water run-off, maximise water penetration and reduce erosion.

Across the border in Niger, the community-based Guessebodi National Forest Project was launched not far from Niamey in 1980, in an attempt to enable reforestation by encouraging villagers to build windbreaks and establish nurseries. The project may have been a success at a micro level in reducing soil depletion, but the dire state of Niger's soil means that it probably comes too late for widespread application throughout the country.

For information on ecotourism projects in Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire, see the boxed texts, p338 and p278 respectively.



*Africa in Crisis*, by Lloyd Timberlake, is a damning chronicle of Africa's environmental history, with clear-headed solutions offered; written in 1986, its examples of Côte d'Ivoire are somewhat outdated.

Patches of desert began to appear around villages which once lay many kilometres south of the desert's southern boundary. As populations increased and enticements by Western seed companies prompted ever-more farmers to increase the land under cultivation, the few remaining trees and forests were cut down, thereby accelerating a process which began centuries ago. The situation is especially grim in Niger, where less than 3% of the land can now support agriculture.

Even the fraught issue of poverty alleviation can carry a considerable cost. Many international bodies favour alleviating poverty through large-scale economic development initiated by loans. However, such development often brings with it severe environmental damage; heavy industry creates air and water pollution, and inevitably requires the use of natural resources.

It is often also said that Westerners are so intent on saving Africa's wilderness because we have none left of our own. Indeed, the figures are stark: a citizen of urban Britain, Australia or the USA, for example, consumes more than 50 times more of the earth's resources than a rural inhabitant of Niger or Guinea-Bissau. All of which may just mean that the most effective way to preserve West Africa's environment is to ensure that efforts are made to reduce Western consumption and encourage *everyone* (and not just poor West African farmers) to use resources sustainably.