

Mali Today: Land, Society, People

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Crossroads of civilizations, center of three great empires, at the forefront of Africa's democracies, Mali is the largest country in West Africa, covering an area of 1.24 million square kilometers (approximately 479,000 square miles). It is located in the Saharan and Sahelian climatic zones, with desert in the north and, to the south, plateaus, savanna, and flood plains. Fed by two major rivers, the Niger and the Senegal, it is landlocked, surrounded by seven countries. Mali's geographic location and its dynamic history have predisposed it to play an important role in promoting African unity. Indeed, Mali's constitution is committed to achieving this ultimate goal.

Bamako, the capital, is a city of about a million and a half inhabitants. Of Mali's total population of over 11 million, 65 percent are under the age of 25, and 20 percent under the age of 5. Mali faces a great challenge in providing education and future employment for its youth.

Bamanan is the language spoken by the vast majority of Malians, and it coexists with twelve other national languages including Fula, Sonraï, Dogon, Tamasheq, Senufo, and Bobo. Studies are under way to include the national languages more systematically in the academic curricula alongside French, which is the country's official language.

The traditional stratification of Mali's ethnic communities according to their occupations has become less pronounced in recent times. Men and women from different ethnic groups more frequently intermarry today, and this process has been accelerated by the increasing formal education of children, rising urbanization, and the nation's democratization.

Eighty to 90 percent of Mali's population is Muslim. Muslims practice a tolerant form of Islamic tradition and belong to numerous religious brotherhoods, such as the *qadiri*, *tijani*, and *wahhabites*. The Malian Muslims also live in peace with Christians and those who practice traditional religions, who number 10 to 20 percent of the population. Religious diversity is a source of cultural enrichment. For example, recent mosque architecture reflects Middle Eastern, not only local, styles. Once rare and inconspicuous in Mali, new churches, above all Protestant ones, are appearing here and there throughout the country. These Muslim and Christian houses of worship connect Mali to the architectural traditions beyond its own borders in religious centers worldwide.

Mali is now a healthy, secular, multiparty democracy, but Malians have paid dearly for their freedom. In March 1991, a popular revolution, supported by the army, overthrew a dictatorship and instated political pluralism after a three-decade reign by a single party. The 1992



Soccer is Mali's national sport.
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(Top) Cars, buses, bicycles, and pedestrians go to and from work daily across Bamako's bridges.

A couple registers their marriage at the mayor's office in a civil marriage ceremony. Many couples celebrate both religious and civil ceremonies, which often take place the same day. Photos © National Museum of Mali

constitution brought about the Third Republic, granted all fundamental liberties, and guaranteed the separation of powers. Today, there are more than 50 political parties, evidence of the desire of Malians to celebrate their hard-earned freedom. Multiparty elections have taken place since 1991. The current head of state, elected in 2002, is Amadou Toumani Touré.

Mali has one of the freest presses in Africa, confirming its dedication to democratic ideals. Malians can choose from over 30 daily, weekly, monthly, bi-monthly, or quarterly newspapers on a whole range of subjects, from general information to sports or culture. And Mali has without question the freest radio in all of Africa. A hundred or so stations broadcast throughout the country through rural radio and the

national radio to inform, educate, and entertain Malians.

Economically, Mali is also turning around. The state is gradually disengaging from the key economic sectors, either because they were poorly managed or in the hope of more efficiently developing resources. Mali's lack of access to the sea, the aftermath of a colonial economy, and the effects of seasonal droughts since 1972 have seriously handicapped economic development. However, the government has outlined a strategy of accelerated growth projected for 2010, and a strategy to fight poverty.

With irrigation and more efficient tapping of the rivers, modern agriculture is developing alongside the traditional subsistence agriculture. Mali is the largest cotton producer in sub-Saharan Africa; cotton cultivation presently comprises 10 percent of the GNP and 58 percent of export revenues. Animal husbandry also makes an important contribution to the GNP; it provides herders with 80 percent of their annual income and has significant potential for development. Mali is the third largest gold producer in Africa, and American companies participate in the exploration and development of mines in Mali. Besides gold, other mineral reserves promise an industrial future for Mali, such as phosphate, marble, kaolin, and several others as yet undeveloped.

Tourism also has a bright future in Mali. Djenné, her sister city Timbuktu (Tombouctou), and the Dogon Natural and Cultural Sanctuary have been designated World Heritage Sites by UNESCO. Every region of the country has riches to offer: waterfalls, wildlife, architecture, and music festivals, to mention only a few. Aware of the economic benefits as well as the negative environmental and cultural impacts of tourism, Mali designed a master plan in 1988 to develop its resources for tourism in a responsible, intelligent, and coherent way; this includes greater involvement by local populations in decision-making and the management of their natural and cultural heritage. ■