



## BURKINA FASO

**Area:** 105,869 square miles

**Population:** 20,107,509 (2018 estimate)

**Capital:** Ouagadougou

**Ethnic Groups:** Mossi (more than 47%), Fulani, Lobi, Bobo, Mandè, Senufo, Gurunsi, Gurma, Tuaregi

**Languages:** French (official, yet spoken daily by about 15%); Mòoré, Mandinka, Bambara, and others

**Religions:** Islam (50%), animism and indigenous beliefs (40%), Christianity, mainly Roman Catholic (15%)

**Literacy:** 36% (2018 estimate)

**Life Expectancy:** 55.9 years (2017 estimate)

**Industry:** Food processing, textiles, chemicals

**Exports:** Cotton, gold, shea nuts, livestock, vegetables

**Food Crops:** Sorghum, millet, corn, beans, rice, peanuts

**Gini (Income Inequality) Index:** 35.3 (2014 World Bank, having fallen from 48.1 since 1994);

**Gender Inequality Index:** 0.594 (2019); #147 out of 162 nations



### The Land of Rivers

The landlocked region of today's Burkina Faso (often translated as "the land of upright or incorruptible people") was a crossroads for resistance across the centuries. Once named Upper Volta, after the three major rivers that cross the territory, Burkina Faso's political and social roots also point to the theme of unity and confederation. Pre-colonial villages were united through widespread expressions of ritual and through political coalitions that sometimes erupted in warfare. The local communities resisted the attempts of large states to swallow and tax them.

The great Mossi confederation first joined villages and communities together sometime between 1100 and 1400 CE, using horse cavalry and a complex nexus of trading connections. The Mossi states included Wagadugu, whose ruler Naba Duluga converted to Islam around the end of the 18th century. Wagadugu persisted until about 1895, the time of the French invasions of the Middle Niger. Situated between the gold-producing forests to the south and the dry Sahara to the north, the region's broad, open savanna attracted competition from Mali, the larger Songhai state, and eventually French colonization. As part of the French West African Confederation in the late 19th century, this combination would make the region a formidable site of resistance and a leading force for decolonization in West Africa.

### Beyond Colonial Rule

Historians have been keen to study the unusually dispersed patterns of settlement in Burkina Faso amidst the fabric of large West African states and empires. The French colonizers found the region's men, women, and children to be elusive targets. Despite burning abandoned villages to the ground, the French were unable to force them to surrender to French rule. One French official summarized the situation by bemoaning the fact that "after a month and a half [February to April 1916], the destruction of twenty-five villages, and causing deprivation to about 30,000 people, we are still waiting for the first submission. This furious determination to resist is unheard-of in the history of the Soudan" (Qtd in Saul and Moyer 2001, 196). Eventually African reliance on the protective powers of ancestral shrines and ritual-supported guerilla warfare strategies could not outmatch the French artillery and machine guns, although sporadic and independent resistance continued beyond the generation of the Volta-Bani Anticolonial War of 1915-1916.

The violence of French colonial conquest left a dark shadow across the twentieth century. In the years after full independence in 1960, the country witnessed multiple military coups and few successful elections. Since 2016, the government has blamed jihadists linked to al-Qaeda and the Islamic State for a series of violent terrorist attacks on a large hotel popular with foreigners in the city of Ouagadougou and smaller villages, where hundreds of Burkinabè were killed. Around the same time, charges were brought against former President Blaise Compaoré for the killing of his political rival Thomas Sankara, a popular Marxist reformer whom he once had succeeded in ousting and replacing.

### **Building Bridges with Cinema**

Burkina Faso has played a remarkable role in the development of African cinema. Since 1969, Burkina Faso has hosted FESPACO, the premiere showcase of African cinema, usually held in the capital city every other year. In Ouagadougou, a small group, which included Senegalese filmmaker Ousmane Sembène, had met the previous year to discuss their frustrations over the constraints on production and distribution that affected the quantity and quality of films available to African viewing audiences. FESPACO's primary goal would be to decolonize African cinema, much in the way that the Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o had envisioned for post-colonial African literature. Burkinabè filmmakers include Idrissa Ouédraogo, Gaston Kaboré, Dani Kouyaté, Fanta Régina Nacro, Apolline Traoré, and others are well known throughout the world for their artistic accomplishments. Since FESPACO 1985, there also have been innovative collaborations with African American directors, distributors, critics, and historians. By the mid-1990s, the pan-African film festival audience had grown to nearly one million participants.

The success of their festival came in part from the cultural resistance and political strategies of Burkina Faso itself, where all movie theatres were once owned by French companies. In the 1960s, the Burkinabè government nationalized the theatres, giving the state more control over showing African films. This move was touted by some as a courageous decision that simultaneously challenged France's cultural and economic grip over its former colony (Sawadogo and Jacobsen 1995). Two organizations, the Société Nationale Voltaïque de Cinéma (SONAVOCI) and the Centre National du Cinéma (CNC), were established in 1970 and 1977, respectively, to promote Burkina Faso's national cinema. In the 1980s, President Thomas Sankara was the singular African leader wholeheartedly committed to the promotion of African cinema. He had a strong vision for Africa and astutely perceived Black African films as the cultural bridge between the newly independent African nations and the heritage of their diverse peoples.

--Candice Goucher, December 2021

### **Further Reading**

Diawara, Manthia, "African Cinema and Festivals: FESPACO," *Black Camera*, vol 12 (1) 2020: 107-116.

Sankara, Thomas, *We are Heirs of the World's Revolutions: Speeches from the Burkina Faso Revolution 1983-87*, Atlanta: Pathfinder Press, 2007.

Saul, Mahir and Patrick Moyer, *West African Challenge to Empire: Culture and History in the Volta-Bani Anticolonial War*, Athens, OH and Oxford: Ohio University Press and James Currey, 2001.

Sawadogo, Geremie and Alisha Jacobsen, "African Festival Promotes Native Work," *The Christian Science Monitor*, March 3, 1995.

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