



SENEGAL

Area: 196,722 sq km (75954.7888 sq. mi). **Population:** 16,082,442 (July 2021 est.)

Capital: Dakar **Ethnic Groups:** Wolof 37.1%, Pulaar (Fula) 26.2%, Serer 17%,

Mandinka 5.6%, Jola 4.5%, Soninke 1.4%, other 8.3%

(includes Europeans and persons of Lebanese descent, 2017 est.)

Languages: French (official), Wolof, Pulaar, Jola, Mandinka, Serer, Soninke

Religion: Muslim 95.9% (mostly Sufi), Christian 4.1% (mostly Roman Catholic) (2016 est.)

Life Expectancy: 63.83 years **Literacy:** 51.9%

Economy: agricultural and fish processing, phosphate mining, fertilizer production, petroleum refining, zircon, and gold mining, construction materials, ship construction and repair.

Gini (Income Inequality) Index: 40.3 (2011 est.); country comparison to the world: 61

Gender Inequality Index: 0.533 (Medium #138/189; comp. US=0.204 Very High)



“Music in Africa often contains messages. Music in Senegal, and Africa, is never music for music's sake or solely for entertainment. It's always a vehicle for social connections, discussions and ideas.” ---Youssou N'Dour, Senegalese griot, singer, writer, actor, and politician.

Songs of the Past

The memory keepers of Senegal's ancient past were traditionalists (also known as griots), whose inherited praise songs and stories linked the past and present. They sang of the early empires of the modern region of Senegal, including Tekrur, established by Fulani peoples and contemporary to ancient Ghana, which came into being in the ninth century. The power of both would be diminished by the rise of the Mali empire in the 14th century, when it reached to the Atlantic coast, and then by the mighty Jolof Empire that lasted until the 19th century. Archeological evidence of tool making, small-scale cultivation, pottery, blacksmithing, and long-distance exchange also suggests the sophistication of early technology and trade. In the regions along the Senegal and Gambia Rivers and other riparian plains, the early towns diversified with the arrival of Islam, securing economic and cultural ties that still connect across the Sahara to North Africa and beyond.

The Colonial Era

Beginning around the mid-15th century, Serer, Fulani, Wolof, and others also began to trade with Portuguese and other European merchants along the Atlantic coast. In competition with later Dutch and French merchants, these foreign interests easily confiscated islands and set up small fort cities to protect maritime trade routes in the early modern era (c.1500-c.1800). Among the most infamous was the complex built on Gorée Island, where some of the local captives were held and shipped across the Atlantic. Later colonial conquests required greater violence and sustained brutality. On the mainland, and North of Gorée, the French and other merchants established a settlement which later grew into Saint Louis, the original governing seat for French colonizers in West Africa. From French ports, more than 1.38 million of the total 12.5 million enslaved Africans were shipped across the Atlantic between 1650 and 1850.

Eurafrican interactions extended beyond the commercial realm as European merchants sought wives and companions. These liaisons ranged from non-consensual sexual exploitation of women captives to complex, local arrangements with ruling families. Their entry into extensive networks of negotiated alliances with elites afforded European men greater access to local labor and supplies, while sometimes subjecting them to local rules of behavior. Some of the resident Europeans became Africanized and their descendants straddled both cultural worlds, which offered the African women signares (“ladies”) the possibilities of amassing and inheriting wealth and power, but they were never equal partners in the brutal world of capitalist slavery. One woman known as Senhora Philippa briefly controlled the bulk of Senegambian trade by the 1630s. During the Seven Years War (1756-1763), the British captured Senegal and the era of uncertainty benefitted certain local interests. The wealthy merchant Anne Pépin (1747-1837), herself a daughter of another signara, secured a legacy of influence. Her brother built the Maison des Esclaves (the Slave House) on Gorée and her niece Anna Colas Pépin became the signara of François d'Orléans, whose father Louis Philippe would become the King of France. Although many interpreters and entrepreneurs gained advantages and sometimes even resisted European authority, many other mixed-race descendants of African and European relationships would face severe discrimination in the colonial era.

Resistance and the Birth of a Democratic Nation State

The courage and resilience of grassroots resistance against French colonialism was epitomized in the epic battles waged by Lat Dior (1842-1886), the damal (ruler) of the Wolof state of Cayor, which opposed French occupation, including construction of a colonial railway.

Some resistance also was more overt during the final stages of French colonization after 1895. Aline Sitoe Diatta (1920–1944) was an early militant agitator against French rule in the Casamance. Like the famous resistance leader Samori, she was captured and died in exile. From the establishment of Saint Louis in 1659 until 1895, at which time France fully controlled the region of the Senegambia after consolidating their claims as an empire in the formation of French West Africa (AOF, the “Afrique occidentale française,” a federation of eight colonial territories), another 64 years would pass before Senegal gained semi-independence from France. The second of Senegal’s largest cities, Touba, is considered an international religious site thanks to the annual pilgrimage commemorating the Senegalese Sufi Islam mystic, poet, and saint Sheik Amadou Bamba (1853-1927), his pacifist resistance, and exile by the French after 1895. With more than four million followers, the popular Sufi brotherhood (known as Mouridism) emphasized the interconnectedness of art and life. It was based on Bamba’s teachings proposing the sanctity and dignity of labor. After their heroic participation in the Second World War, many Senegalese began agitating for independence and self-determination. Upon the dissolution of the provisional federation of French West African territories, Senegal became fully independent in 1960, with Dakar as its capital. The poet of Négritude and intellectual titan Léopold Sédar Senghor (1906-2001) became the nation’s first president. The Négritude Movement flourished between the 1930s and the 1950s. Its philosophy offered a sweeping vision of African identity and literary renaissance that encompassed the entire African diaspora and competed as a powerful alternative to European notions of “civilization.”

Since the discovery of offshore oil resources in 1961, Senegal enjoyed greater economic success than many other West African countries after independence. Senegal is now dealing with environmental changes because of global warming. The nation has engaged in a “green” initiative, planting over 12 million trees in the country since 2015.

An arts revival merged Western and indigenous forms of expression by the 21st century. The Dakar ballet performs traditional Senegalese dance as well as Western classical ballet. Senegal successfully hosted the First World Festival of Negro Arts in 1966. Since that time, griots have transitioned from an early attempt at Western music styles to a fusion of the local with Caribbean and Western music called mbalax. Known internationally, Youssou N'Dour (1959-) not only performs mbalax, but also strictly traditional Wolof music. Among the African continent’s most prominent early filmmakers, famed writer and director Ousmane Sembène (1923-2007) has been called both the “father” and “griot” of African cinema. He was eulogized for providing the world with exquisite films that offered an alternative vision of African history.

----Written by Fredrick Hardyway (August 2021)

Further Reading

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