



DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

Area: 905,568 sq. mi

Population: 92.64 million (2021 UN estimate) **Capital:** Kinshasa

Ethnic Groups: More than 200 ethnic groups; majority are Bantu.

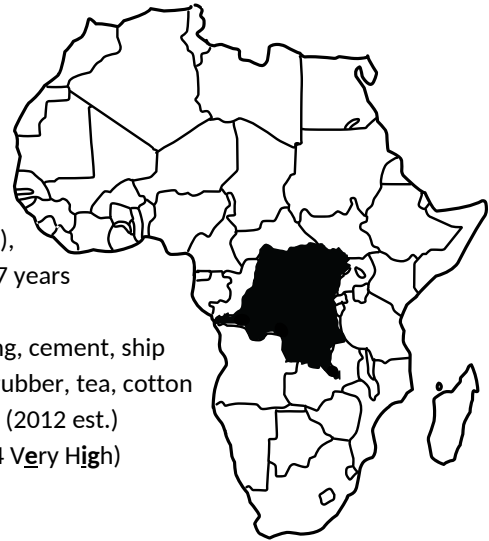
Languages: French (official, 10%), plus more than 200 African languages, including four national languages: Lingala, Kikongo (Kituba), Tshiluba, and Kingwana (Kiswahili dialect) **Religion:** Roman Catholic (50%), Protestant (20%), Kimbanguist (10%), Islam (10%), other indigenous (10%) **Life Expectancy:** 60.7 years

Literacy: 66.8% total (36.7% of women with any secondary education)

Economy: Mining (diamonds, copper, zinc), mineral processing, manufacturing, cement, ship repair. **Exports:** Diamonds, copper, crude oil, cobalt, coffee, cacao, palm oil, rubber, tea, cotton

Food Crops: Cassava, corn, rice, bananas **Gini (Income Inequality) Index:** 42.1 (2012 est.)

Gender Inequality Index: 0.617 (World 0.436) rank 150/167; comp. US=0.204 **Very High**



MEMORY AND HISTORY

The earliest history of the region now occupied by the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the largest modern nation in sub-Saharan Africa, offers a stunningly deep perspective on the vastness and diversity of the continent. Equatorial Africa was the home of hunters and gatherers, including BaTwa people (once called “Pygmies,” originating with a Greek myth of small people), and Bantu (Niger-Congo)-language farmers, who co-existed for at least 4,000 years. From the end of the last Ice Age to the end of the 18th century, residents in the region’s savannas, hills, and rainforests built complex political and social structures and are credited with a series of agricultural and technological innovations. At the tomb site of Kamilamba in southeast DRC, a burial from the eighth to 10th centuries CE included a forged iron anvil and iron tools, cultural symbols of royal regalia and transformative power in later centuries. Linguistic, genetic, and archaeological evidence suggests the emergence of large states and empires by the 14th century CE.

One of these states, the legendary Luba, may have been a loose configuration of alliances and trading networks rather than a cohesive political entity, while the first ManiKongo used ritual sanction and authority to construct a kingdom that would last for centuries. The Kingdom of Kongo was known to early Portuguese mariners and merchants, who engaged in trade in gold, copper, and slaves and encouraged religious conversion to Roman Catholicism beginning in the 1480s. The Kongo elites forged the nature of early Atlantic world relationships through their justice system, expert diplomacy, and willingness to assimilate aspects of elite European culture. The Kongolese King Nzinga a Nkuwu was baptized with the name João I, in 1491. Children and nobles studied in Europe and later rulers, including the son of the ManiKongo, born Mvemba a Nzinga and baptized Afonso I, and Afonso I’s children were also steeped in Christian theology. Much of Afonso’s reign is known from the letters Afonso and others wrote in Portuguese. In his 1526 letter to the king of Portugal, Afonso I wrote: “Each day the traders are kidnapping our people – children of this country, sons of our nobles and vassals, even people of our own family. This corruption and depravity are so widespread that our land is entirely depopulated...It is our wish that this Kingdom be not a place for the trade or transport of slaves.” Other forms of memory keeping included the use of lukasa (wooden memory boards) by Luba oral specialists, who counterbalanced the power of chiefs and kings, with knowledge from the past. Their origin stories and visual arts describe the blacksmith-kings who were descended from legendary Mbidi Kiluwe and forged power, politics, the past, and the present. Between 1501 and 1866, more than four million of the 12.5 million enslaved Africans would embark from West Central African slave trade ports.

THE CONGO RIVER: “River That Swallows All Rivers”

Bakongo people called the river nzere or nzadi, meaning “the river that swallows all rivers.” When the Berlin Conference (1884-85) consolidated the Belgian King Léopold’s claims to the Congo, a long and bloody history of profit and exploitation reached new depths of depravity and trade itself swallowed lives and limbs. Not only were enslaved Africans shipped into the Atlantic world, but they were employed locally on European rubber plantations and in mining operations. Atrocities included coerced labor, the severing of hands and feet for failure to meet quotas, public executions, and forced rape.

By the time the colony of Congo Free State was taken from King Leopold’s control and annexed to Belgium in 1908, 10 million had perished in the century’s first human rights test. Not only had the international community failed to stop the atrocities, but resistance to colonial forced labor went largely unacknowledged. Anticolonial protests eventually succeeded in winning independence but met with a powerful backlash from western powers. Patrice Lumumba, now remembered as

a prophet and symbol of the struggle for self-determination, was the left-leaning, fiery African nationalist leader of the Congolese National Movement (Mouvement National Congolais or MNC), the only non-ethnic political organization, which unexpectedly received the highest vote in the elections on May 29, 1960. Lumumba became the Prime Minister, while Joseph Kasavubu, the leader of the opposition, became the Head of State. In his Independence Day speech on July 1, 1960, Lumumba shocked the Belgian delegation, led by King Baudouin, by decrying the brutality and humiliation suffered by Africans at the hands of Europeans. Lumumba appointed a 29-year-old ally, Joseph Mobutu, as head of the militia, only to have Mobutu stage a military coup and form an alliance with Kasavubu on September 14, 1960. On November 27, 1960, Mobutu's troops captured Lumumba, and on January 17, 1961, they flew him to Elizabethville in Katanga, where he was murdered with Belgian and C.I.A. complicity at the height of Cold War hostilities.

Mobutu remained in power from 1965 to 1997, after a second coup. Although the nation's name was changed to Zaire, Mobutu's rigid, authoritarian regime was notoriously constant in its disregard for the rule of law, in favor of nepotism and corruption. Mobutu amassed billions of dollars in personal wealth siphoned from government bribes and state-owned mining. In 1997, rebel forces led by Laurent-Désiré Kabila eventually forced Mobutu into exile in Morocco, where he died. Kabila was in power for four years before being assassinated; he was followed by others, including his son Joseph Kabila, all of whom were accused of seeking power and wealth through their political engagement. The nation and region consequently were further destabilized by heightened violence and civil war. In the 21st century, the only constant seems to have been the excessive greed and the secured continuity of foreign interests in the rich mining resources, particularly the mining of the conflict mineral "coltan," the colloquial African name for columbite-tantalite, a metallic ore used to produce the elements niobium and tantalum. The Congo has 80 percent of the world's known reserves of tantalum minerals. Tantalum is used primarily in capacitors, which are vital components in electronic devices, ranging widely from mobile phones to laptop computers. Coltan smuggling has been implicated as a major source of income fueling the region's wars. DRC is the world's largest producer of cobalt and the second largest producer of industrial diamonds. Another important mineral product is copper, which accounts for 35 to 55 percent of the country's export earnings.

BREAKING THE SILENCE

Between 1998 and 2012, the disordered nation suffered five million deaths, more than the total number of deaths in the centuries of the transatlantic slave trade. For the past decade, watch groups such as the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and the Association of Concerned Africa Scholars (ACAS) have tried to persuade world leaders to respond to what IRC has termed "the world's deadliest documented conflict since WW II" (ACAS 2012). The nation's first democratic election was held in 2018, after having been postponed since 2016 in the wake of political violence, bringing to power Félix Tshisekedi. The new leader was forced initially into a coalition with Kabila, but nonetheless initiated a government overhaul and imposed a greater inclusivity of women and younger politicians.

As Congolese filmmaker Balufu Bakupa-Kanyinda noted in a segment of the documentary film *La Belle at the Movies*, "Cinema is an important art: it's the art of telling the world about yourself." Congolese-born historian Jacques Depelchin likely would agree. Writing of the silences in African history, Depelchin (2005) pointed out that the cultural core that enabled "African societies to continue to look at the world in their own terms is precisely what provided the possibility of speaking of a return" to a place prior to the silences and silencing (20).

Candice Goucher, August 2021

FURTHER READING

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