

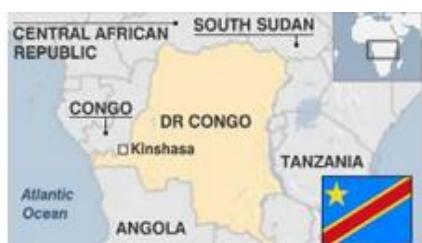
# Congolese Culture & Foods

Country of Origin: Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)

Primary Language(s): French, Lingala, Kikongo, Tshiluba, Swahili<sup>7</sup>

Percent of Iowa's Population: Of the 1105 primary refugees arriving in Iowa in 2018, 26 % were from the DRC<sup>9</sup>

The DRC is located in central Africa and mostly landlocked except for a 25 mile coastline on the Atlantic Ocean. It is the second largest country in Africa.<sup>1</sup> The Republic of Congo to the west shares a similar name, border and history, but these are distinct separate nations.<sup>2</sup>



Congolese clothing is made from colorful print fabrics called pagne.<sup>10</sup>



## Education and Literacy

Over 3 million children do not attend school. Of those who start, 44% do so after age 6 years; 67% of students who attend first grade will only attend through sixth grade and of those only 75% will pass the exit exam. Violence at the schools poses a barrier to attendance<sup>17</sup> and could influence girls' attendance. Dozens of children of various ages share one classroom taught by a single teacher without books, pencils or paper. Many Congolese refugees come to Iowa to give their children a better education.<sup>15</sup>

## Background

The DRC has a long and turbulent history. During the height of the Kongo Empire (1000 BC – 1500 AD) there was a strong government and established trading networks at local, regional and international levels. Businesses prospered resulting in financial wealth. Europeans began using these trading routes in the 1400's and exploited the country's natural resources. Slave trade also began during this time and decreased human resources contributing to the decline of the Kongo Empire. King Leopold II of Belgium acquired the country as his personal property in the 1870's. He inflicted abuse on both its people and land to increase his own wealth.<sup>3</sup> Independence from Belgium was gained in 1960 and the country was renamed Zaire in 1971. Refugees from Rwanda and Burundi fled to Zaire in 1994 to escape war and genocide. Between 1996-97 (First Congo War<sup>12</sup>) Tutsi rebels took control of eastern Zaire.<sup>4</sup> The 2nd Congo War (1998 – 2003)<sup>12</sup> began to eliminate Hutu rebel problems along the border<sup>13</sup> and grew to involve seven African countries<sup>3</sup>. Zaire was renamed DRC in 1997. By the end of the war, 2.5 million people were killed and Joseph Kabila emerged as leader of the DCR. A transitional government and interim parliament was created in 2003 while fighting continued in eastern DRC. The first free elections in 40 years were held in 2006 and, due to an unclear result, a runoff election determined Kabila the winner. Thousands of people fled to escape a border dispute with Uganda and an Ebola outbreak in 2008.<sup>4</sup> Kabila won fraudulent elections in 2011 and he lacked legitimacy among the Congolese. He refused to hold elections in 2016 to retain power, but after public pressure, he organized elections in December, 2018.<sup>3</sup> The current DRC president is Felix Tshisekedi who won those elections and took office in January, 2019.<sup>5</sup>

## Traditions, Customs, & Taboos

Congo people are very generous with the little food they have. A family's sole chicken or goat will be eaten to observe holidays, weddings, funerals and births.<sup>6</sup>

Many Congolese revere their ancestors and ask them for rain, health and good crops. Ancestors are welcomed by tying a white cloth around a tree.<sup>6</sup>

The left hand is exclusively used for personal hygiene and should not be used to shake hands or pass objects. Hand gestures often replace speaking. It is common for people to touch when greeting each other, but incorrect gestures could be offensive. It is considered impolite to point at someone.<sup>7</sup>

A permit must be obtained to take photographs; travelers are advised to avoid photography in official areas, airports, and riverbanks.<sup>8</sup>

## Holidays & Celebrations

Christianity is the major religion in the DRC with 46 - 48% Catholic; 26 - 28% Protestant; 16.5% Kimbanguists.<sup>10</sup> (Kimbanguism is a branch of Christianity embracing Puritan ethics founded in 1921 by Simon Kimbangu, a Congolese Baptist mission catechist).<sup>11</sup> Islam and indigenous beliefs make up 10% each.<sup>8</sup>

Christmas is the most popular religious holiday<sup>7</sup> (but it is less commercialized than in the US and presents are uncommon<sup>14</sup>). Easter is also celebrated. New Year's Eve is the most celebrated national holiday. Other national holidays are National Hero's Day (commemorating two political heroes' deaths) and Independence Day.<sup>7</sup>

Family members receive cards and gifts on Parents' Day (August 1). Sporting events and festivities geared to young people are held on Youth Day (October 14).<sup>14</sup>

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## Health Disparities

Most Congolese accept Western medicine; however, some people still believe illness is an incurable curse or punishment from God particularly mental illness. Some health care problems are related to living for years in violent conflict situations and refugee camps – especially malnutrition and anemia for women and children.<sup>2</sup> There is no formal prenatal care for rural women. Occasional mobile clinics may come; most use a “wise woman” (knowledgeable of pregnancy/delivery). Urban women can get regular prenatal care at hospitals with modern medicine. During labor, they are in one large room with 20-30 beds and the wise woman will come at time of delivery. Most Congolese only visit the doctor when sick. Birth control is usually not discussed.<sup>12</sup>

## Traditional Foods & Meal Patterns

Common traditional Congolese foods<sup>21</sup>:

- Sombre - cassava leaves, onion and chili. Dried fish/meat may be added.
- Fufu or Ugali - cassava and/or corn flour. Rolled into egg-size balls and dipped in stew.
- Igikoma - corn, sorghum, wheat flour, sugar and water. Eaten as porridge at breakfast.
- Kwanga - commercially produced fermented bread made from cassava wrapped in banana leaves.
- Red palm oil - high in saturated and monounsaturated fats, Vitamin E and beta-carotene.

Most families eat 1 – 2 large meals a day with the main meal at 3:00 PM. Meals in rural areas are eaten from a communal dish using fingers. Plates are used in urban areas. Meals are served at a table with water. Snacks are not common.<sup>21</sup>

## Considerations for WIC

- WIC staff need to clarify the language Congolese families speak. While the official language of the DRC is French, they may speak a regional language.<sup>21</sup>
- Promptness in attending appointments should be emphasized as some Congolese families may have a different perception of time.<sup>21</sup>
- WIC staff should allow the client to guide the amount of touching and eye contact during appointments<sup>21</sup> and be mindful of avoiding the left hand.<sup>7</sup>
- In 2014, 48% of infants age 0 – 5 months were exclusively breastfed and 22% were exclusively breastfed at 4 – 5 months.<sup>22</sup> Immigrant mothers may be influenced by the lack of public nursing and the availability of formula.<sup>21</sup> Mothers’ concerns of potential embarrassment and perceived need for formula should be addressed.
- Igikoma and other solids may be introduced to infants before 6 months of age. Iron-fortified infant cereals should be recommended accompanying a discussion of introducing solids and texture progression.<sup>21</sup>
- In order to have “good blood”, two tablespoons of palm oil may be consumed by pregnant women daily.<sup>21</sup> WIC foods high in Vitamins A and E can be suggested for their diets. If anemia is a concern, Fe-rich WIC foods should be recommended.
- Snacks are not typical<sup>21</sup>, so the rationale and suggestions for them for children and pregnant/breastfeeding women may be needed.
- Since routine medical visits are not common<sup>12</sup> families will need encouragement to make health appointments and followed-up to ensure they were kept.

## What’s the Iowa Connection?

Congolese people choose Iowa for job opportunities.<sup>18</sup> Congolese professionals in the US with backgrounds in healthcare, education, engineering and mechanics have to start over in English. Other French-speaking adults work in meatpacking plants. Many Congolese are willing to work in lower-paid unskilled jobs to be able to have a steady income and send money to family in the DRC.<sup>16</sup> The Congolese Community of Iowa is an association of Congolese people from the Iowa City and Cedar Rapids areas for the purpose of providing mutual support.<sup>19</sup>

Poulet a’ la moambe (chicken in a palm butter sauce) is the national dish of the DRC. It is pictured below with rice and saka saka (cassava leaves).<sup>20</sup>



## How are we Living?

The average family in the DRC has 4 – 5 children with the father as head of household. Children assist with chores (e.g. fetch water, babysit, tend crops).<sup>7</sup> Of all refugees coming to Iowa, 48% are under 21 years of age and 55% of refugees in Johnson County come from the DRC<sup>15</sup> (3,000 live in Iowa City/Coralville<sup>12</sup>; 500 in Waterloo<sup>16</sup>). Families arriving to the US by the Diversity Immigrant Visa Program can choose their location, but the US government determines locations for refugees.<sup>12</sup>

