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© 2003 Matt McClure

Burkina Faso

Customary Handshake and Inquiries on Health, Happiness and Family

From my kitchen window, I watched these two men approach each other on bicycles. They both had places to go, but each found time to stop and shake hands, not once, but nearly a dozen times, and to inquire about the health and happiness of the other's family.

Handshaking was the first custom I was taught upon arriving in Burkina Faso, and I soon came to realize that it was more than a superficial greeting to the locals. It reflected the deep cultural belief that strong bonds of friendship and family take precedence over all else. I went to Burkina an educator, and returned having learned something of fundamental importance. No matter how busy I am, I can always make time for a handshake.

— Matt McClure, *Peace Corps/Burkina Faso, 2001-03*

Burkina Faso

Capital Ouagadougou

Population 15,746,232 (July 2009 est.)

Life Expectancy 52.95 years

Literacy 21.8% (age 15 and over can read and write)

Languages French (official), Sudanic languages 90%

Religions Muslim 50%, indigenous beliefs 40%, Christian 10%

Government parliamentary republic

Source: *The World Factbook, 2010*

Burkina Faso



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© 2001 Shawnté Pacheco

Turkmenistan Relaxing After Picking Cotton

As the cock crows and the sky comes to life, the people of Yalkym and many other villages around Turkmenistan break bread, sip tea, and get ready for a full day of picking cotton. Women, children, and men strap homemade sacks around their waist and head for the fields. September through November is picking season for this cash crop and it is a collective event. While you pick, you laugh, struggle, and talk about life. Taking a break, you squat in a circle together and eat fresh sliced watermelon. Sometimes the villagers bring their cotton home, deseed it and fill handsome pillows, blankets and sleeping mats.

With eyes closed, I can clearly see the expansive fields and smell what the Turkmen call their “white gold” or *ak altyn*. Here my family and the inhabitants of Yalkym village are working hard to bring in the crop; working hard to live fruitful and happy lives.

— *Shawnté Pacheco, Peace Corps/Turkmenistan, 1999-2001*

Turkmenistan

Capital Ashgabat (Ashkhabad)

Population 4,884,887 (July 2009 est.)

Life Expectancy 67.87 years

Literacy 98.8% (age 15 and over can read and write)

Languages Turkmen (official) 72%, Russian 12%, Uzbek 9%, other 7%

Religions Muslim 89%, Eastern Orthodox 9%

Government secular democracy and presidential republic

Source: *The World Factbook, 2010*

Turkmenistan



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© 2000 Shirley J. Halladay

Ecuador Victor and Yolanda

Victor and Yolanda are sitting on a wooden bench against their house where most neighborly visits take place. They have raised their family in this rural agricultural community on the western edge of the Andes. At an altitude of 9,000+ feet, it is a place in the clouds where you often hear the footsteps of your approaching neighbors before you see them. But when the clouds clear, it is breathtaking: rolling hills of forests and cultivated rectangles, dotted with houses and specks of cows and horses, intermittently a winding thread of road. During the dry season the sun sets above the clouds covering the coastal plain, and clouds rush over the descending hills like silent waterfalls.

While Victor and I sat looking at the green panorama, I commented that this village was one of the most beautiful places I had ever seen. Victor beamed. Yolanda emerged from the house with china cups of hot milk, a bowl of *mote* (boiled dried corn), and homemade soft cheese. Even though they had been my neighbors for two years, I hadn't taken their picture until this visit a decade later. Once I offered, they quickly decided where to sit and at the last minute Victor reached up and picked the flowers.

— Shirley J. Halladay, *Peace Corps/Malaysia 1978-80, Ecuador 1987-89*

Ecuador (Republic of Ecuador)

Capital Quito

Population 14,573,101 (2009 est.)

Life Expectancy 75.3 years

Literacy 91% (age 15 and over can read and write)

Languages Spanish (official), Amerindian languages (especially Quechua)

Religions Roman Catholic 95%, other 5%

Government republic

Source: The World Factbook, 2009



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© 1996 Wendy Shapiro

Central African Republic Rain Shower

These are my next-door neighbors, Ramatu, Zayee, and Rita. They are showering with my soap in the rain run-off from my thatched roof. They and their many siblings spent frequent afternoons at my house dancing to my music and drawing with crayons I brought from home. I had many tapes of musicals and the girls would sing “I’m gonna wash that man right outa my hair” and do a great chorus line.

It is from these kids that I learned to speak Sango. One of my favorite Sango words is *senge*, meaning “naked, free of weight, without problems, all is fine.”

I sometimes worked in their family field with the children and their parents. The older sister taught me to pick the best leaves for making *Gunja* and how to find and dig up sweet manioc, a snack right out of the ground.

Their older brother Charlie was a superb artist and produced a book of places and people of Bouca. Their father was a teacher in the local school, an educated and curious man — always anxious to learn about and try new ways of doing things.

Their mother (my “mama” for two years) was a seamstress. She became the mother of her eighth child and a grandmother in the same month.

—Wendy Shapiro, *Peace Corps/Central African Republic 1994-96*

Central African Republic

Capital Bangui

Population 4,511,488 (July 2009 est.)

Life Expectancy 44.47 years

Literacy 48.6% (age 15 and over can read and write)

Languages French (official), Sangho (lingua franca and national language), tribal languages

Religions indigenous beliefs 35%, Protestant 25%, Roman Catholic 25%, Muslim 15%

Government republic

Source: *The World Factbook, 2010*

Central African Republic



This photo appears on the **we all need friends** International Poster, produced by the RPCVs of Wisconsin-Madison, 2010. For more information and to order a complete set of full-size posters, see <http://www.rpcvmadison.org/>.

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© 1982 Jeff Cochrane

Sierra Leone Neighbors Sharing Stories while Weaving

In another place it might be called a quilting bee. The task at hand is important, yet surely could be done by individuals working in the solitary confines of their separate homes. Why should four women working together on four baskets be any better than four women working alone to produce one each?

But then there are the stories to tell about grandchildren, and nephews getting married, and the new postmaster in the next town, and the neighbor down the street who's feeling ill and could use an extra bowl of soup tonight.

And then there were five baskets.

— Jeff Cochrane, *Peace Corps/Sierra Leone 1980-82*

Sierra Leone (Republic of Sierra Leone)

Capital Freetown

Population 5,132,138 (July 2009 est.)

Life Expectancy 55.25 years

Literacy 35.1% (age 15 and over can read and write)

Languages English (official), Mende, Temne, Krio

Religions Muslim 60%, Christian 10%, indigenous beliefs 30%

Government Constitutional democracy

Source: The World Factbook, 2010

Sierra Leone



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© 1981 David Whitman

Brazil Playing Marbles

These marble players are from Ilha de Mare. Off shore from Bahia, Brazil, the small island seems to be caught in a time warp. Although a major city looms on the horizon, this is a place of traditional fishing villages with no paved roads, no cars, and, until recently, no electricity.

The people are humble, friendly, and live in harmony with their environment. When I asked if they visited the mainland often, their universal response was, "No, almost never."

A friend of mine, Jorge, who teaches there, took me to the island. All day I felt as though I was with Gandhi, he was so adored. Kids followed us everywhere. Jorge teaches them about their history and to have pride in their African-Brazilian heritage.

—David Whitman, *Peace Corps/Saint Lucia 1978-1981*

Brazil (Federative Republic of Brazil)

Capital Brasilia

Population 198,739,269 (July 2009 est.)

Life Expectancy 71.99 years

Literacy 88.6% (age 15 and over can read and write)

Languages Portuguese (official), less common: Spanish, German, Italian, Japanese, English

Religions Roman Catholic 73.6%, Protestant 15.4%, Spiritualist 1.3%, others

Government federal republic

Source: The World Factbook, 2010



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© 2005 Dan Patterson

Niger Three Smiling Fulbe Girls

In 2005 I worked as a consultant for CARE International in Niger, helping in their response to a food crisis. One afternoon I visited the village of Doundaye, in the Birni-n-Konni region, to learn and write about some of the work CARE was conducting with "model" mothers who mentor other women to adopt a set of best-practices (i.e., nutrition and sanitation) to safeguard the health and well-being of their children.

As I walked around the village meeting these women, and taking pictures, a crowd of children materialized and started to follow me, hoping to be photographed as well. Amongst the crowd were the three girls pictured above. I couldn't resist their matching headscarves and smiles.

— *Dan Patterson*

Niger (Republic of Niger)

Capital Niamey

Population 15,306,252 (2009 est.)

Life Expectancy 52.6 years

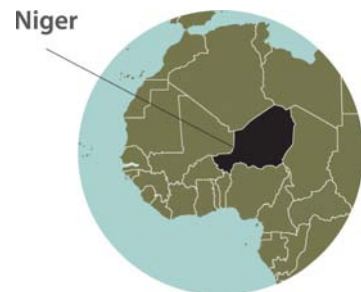
Literacy 28.7% (age 15 and over can read and write)

Languages French (official), Hausa, Djerma

Religions Muslim 80%, other (includes indigenous beliefs and Christian) 20%

Government republic

Source: The World Factbook, 2009



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© 2000 Ephraim French

Uzbekistan At Gate to Silk Road City of Khiva

Five old men sit by the east gate that leads to the inner city of Khiva, known as the “Ichan Kala,” a desert oasis in south Uzbekistan. The gate connects the inner city with the markets and bazaars outside. While my wife, a Peace Corps Medical Officer, visited volunteers to check on their well-being, my daughter and I roamed the bazaar and chanced upon the five men. They represented to me the timeless spirit of the place.

A remote ancient Silk Road city, Khiva was infamous in Central Asia as a center of the slave trade. It served as a desert hideout for thieves and slave traders with Russian men and Persian women highly prized as slaves. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, people are returning to the old city, and the gentle, delightful tumult of central Asian life is reemerging.

— Ephraim French

Uzbekistan (Republic of Uzbekistan)

Capital Tashkent

Population 27,606,007 (July 2009 est.)

Life Expectancy 71.96 years

Literacy 99.3% (age 15 and over can read and write)

Languages Uzbek 74.3%, Russian 14.2%, Tajik 4.4%, other 7.1%

Religions Muslim 88% (mostly Sunni), Eastern Orthodox 9%, other 3%

Government republic

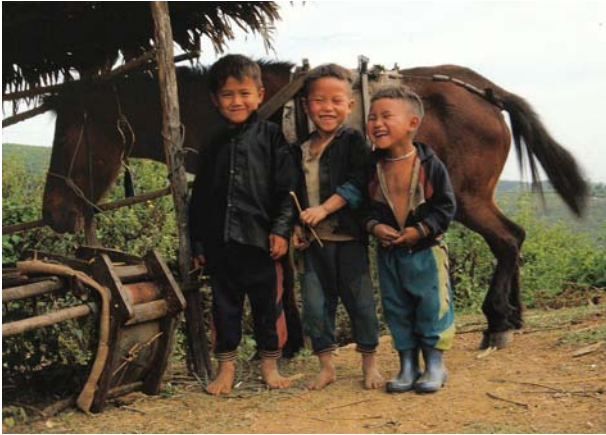
Source: *The World Factbook*, 2010

Uzbekistan



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© 1997 Jess Reed

Laos Hmong Boys with Their Horse

The Hmong live in the mountainous areas of Vietnam, Laos and Thailand, and practice slash and burn agriculture on steep hillsides where they cultivate upland rice. The rice fields are often far from their villages. Horses are used to transport the rice from the fields to the villages.

These boys were accompanying their parents and stopped to rest the horses before moving on up the mountainside. The Hmong live near the mountaintops where they farm and raise livestock using traditional methods. Increasing pressure on land in areas of slash and burn agriculture has raised concerns about deforestation and soil erosion. However, slash and burn agriculture can be a sustainable form of land use when the cycle of clearing, burning, and cropping is followed by regeneration of trees and shrubs.

— Jess Reed, *Department of Animal Sciences, UW Madison*

Laos (Lao People's Democratic Republic)

Capital Vientiane

Population 6,834,345 (July 2009 est.)

Life Expectancy 56.57 years

Literacy 68.7% (age 15 and over can read and write)

Languages Lao (official), French, English, other

Religions Buddhist 67%, Christian 1.5%, other and unspecified 31.5%

Government Communist state

Source: The World Factbook, 2010

