



A guide to Congolese cultural and social norms

December 2004

Published by the Refugee Council on behalf of the Resettlement Inter-Agency Partnership

Acknowledgements

This report was produced by the Resettlement Inter Agency Team (RIAT) on behalf of the Resettlement Inter-Agency Partnership (RIAP).

RIAP is a partnership of eight non-governmental organisations funded by the Home Office to deliver services on the Gateway Protection Programme. RIAP comprises: the International Rescue Committee, Refugee Arrivals Project, Migrant Helpline, the British Red Cross, Refugee Action, the Refugee Council, the Refugee Housing Association, and the Scottish Refugee Council. Thanks go to all partners for their provision of additional information and comments and to Eleanor Passmore who wrote this report.

We are particularly grateful to the following refugee community representatives for agreeing to contribute to this report:

Claude Mbuyi, Refugee Council
Mr Cyril K. Matuwidi, Zairean Congolese Community Association (Zacca-Lisanga)
Georges B. Kisombola, East Congolese Mutual Organisation in the UK
Mr Mao Zakuani, Congolese Youth Association
Marianne Fimbo, Congolese Refugee Women's Association
Mr M Mayiza and Mr E Manguila, Hewa Bora Community Development - Mwese Ya Congo
Michelle Safi Ngongo, Union Ladies Project
Patience Mbumba, Leeds Central African Women's Health and Education
Mr Peter Nsumba, Kongolese Centre for Information & Advice
Peter Nzeza, Congolink
Rodrigue Kitindi, Voice of Pacification
Dr Wa Gamoka Pambu, Community of Congolese Refugees in Great Britain (CORECOG)

Contents

| | |
|---|-----------|
| Introduction | 3 |
| Background | 4 |
| Family structure | 6 |
| Ethnicity, language and religion | 10 |
| Education | 11 |
| Employment and money | 12 |
| Leisure | 13 |
| Food | 15 |
| Health | 16 |
| Hygiene and personal appearance | 18 |
| Resettlement and expectations | 19 |
| Further information | 20 |

Introduction

The following social and cultural information has been produced for front-line agency staff involved in the Home Office funded UK Gateway Protection Programme. It provides a thumbnail sketch of Congolese cultural norms and the likely expectations of the client group. It is designed to help staff prepare for the arrival of Congolese refugees.

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is a very diverse country with customs that differ according to tribe, region, social position and experience. It is therefore unrealistic to accurately reflect all aspects of Congolese culture and society in this guide. The information is based on individual responses to a questionnaire obtained either by conducting one to one interviews or via email/post with UK-based Congolese refugee community organisations and Congolese nationals living in the UK. Individuals' experiences have been supplemented by more specific client group information provided by the Home Office and other international organisations.

The Congolese refugees on the Gateway Protection Programme have lived in refugee camps and urban areas in Uganda for varying periods of time. The majority of the client group will have arrived in Uganda between 1998 and 2000, although some have been there since 1996. Most of the refugees were immediately referred to the Kyangwali refugee camp in the West of Uganda on the border of the DRC, where they have been living ever since. Reference has been made to specific situations in camps where possible but readers should be aware that much of the following information is based on anecdotal evidence and should not be treated as authoritative.

This information is not based on direct contact between the author and the Congolese refugees to be resettled in the UK. Readers should therefore not assume that refugees on the resettlement programme will perfectly conform to the information given.

Background



The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is a vast country with an estimated population of 56 million. Formerly called Zaire¹, the DRC was divided by a violent civil war, which began in 1998 and officially ended in July 2003 when the warring factions agreed to enter into a power sharing agreement. This conflict is the most recent in a long history of political instability and violence in the region, which has caused more deaths than any war since World War II.

Formerly a Belgian colony, the country came under the dictatorship of Joseph Mobutu shortly after gaining its independence in 1960. Under Mobutu, institutionalised corruption, violence and human rights abuses were common. His dictatorship was brought to an end by a coup in 1997 led by Laurent Kabila with support from Rwandan and Ugandan backed rebels. These allies rapidly turned against Kabila and each other, sparking a civil war that would effectively divide the country into three parts. Members of other African nations, notably Angola, Namibia and Zimbabwe, intervened by sending troops in to support the Laurent Kabila regime. A ceasefire accord was eventually signed in 1999 by all six African countries involved in the war. Laurent Kabila was assassinated in 2001 and replaced by his son Joseph Kabila, who now presides over an uneasy peace settlement.

Over the course of five years, the civil war has claimed an estimated 3.5 million lives² either as a direct result of the fighting or from starvation and disease, and forced a further 3.6 million into abandoning their homes.³ The war has worsened the human

¹ In 1971, Joseph Mobutu renamed the country Zaire. In 1997, Zaire once again became known as the Democratic Republic of Congo under Laurent Kabila's regime.

² Katherine Arie, *Crisis Profile: What's going on in the Congo?* (12 August 2004) at: www.alertnet.org/thefacts/reliefresources/109231843231.htm

³ US Committee for Refugees, *World Refugee Survey 2004*, at: http://www.refugees.org/wrs04/regional_summary/africa/index.html

rights abuses suffered by the Congolese people and destroyed the infrastructure of the country, creating a situation which has been described by the United Nations (UN) as one of the world's biggest humanitarian disasters. Yet in spite of the peace settlement, there is continued uncertainty about the stability of the country as many areas remain under the control of rebel forces.

Ethnic tensions in the North East, particularly in the provinces of North and South Kivu and the Ituri district of the Oreintale province, have lead to renewed violence and large-scale massacres during 2003. Civilians have been subjected to rape, abduction, violence, alleged cannibalism, and the destruction and pillaging of property at the hands of rebel groups. The recruitment of child soldiers continues, with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) estimating that as many as 15,000 children were part of armed groups in eastern areas alone during that year.⁴

In 2003, 85 per cent of DRC's displaced persons were in the East and 12,000 Congolese fled to neighbouring Uganda in an attempt to escape the violence.⁵ All of the client group comes from Eastern DRC and have shared experiences of the conflict. Most were separated from immediate family members when they fled their homes, some may have seen family members killed in front of them, and a number may have been detained and ill-treated. It is likely that many of the women have been subjected to rape and torture.

The physical safety of refugees in the Ugandan camp continues to be a matter of concern for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as rebel troops operate in the area. There have been deaths resulting from rebel attacks on settlements. It is against this background that the Gateway Protection Programme is working to provide a route to safety for those whose lives are in continued danger.

⁴ *World Refugee Survey 2004*. Country Updates: Congo-Kinshasa, at: www.refugees.org/wrs04/country_updates/africa/congo_kinshasa.html

⁵ *World Refugee Survey 2004*. Country Updates: Congo-Kinshasa, at: www.refugees.org/wrs04/country_updates/africa/congo_kinshasa.html

Family structure

Family unity and values

The Congolese family lies at the heart of the community. However, there is no such thing as the nuclear family; the family is interpreted in a much broader sense than in the West.

People are taught to abide by traditional family values by respecting their elders, providing for the moral and material needs of their family and bringing up their children well. The behaviour of individuals reflects upon how their family is viewed in the community. People are proud to be viewed as part of a 'good family' and this can improve their marriage prospects.

Role of women

Women are primarily responsible for caring for the family and maintaining the household. In rural areas, women are wholly responsible for feeding the family and therefore carry out most of the agricultural work. Women also contribute to the household finances by being active in small-scale trade of different kinds, for example selling produce at local markets.

Except in rural areas, education is now accessible to both sexes but there continues to be a male bias. It is now normal for women to work in urban areas and they are represented in every aspect of life in the DRC. However, emancipation is occurring slowly and women remain at a disadvantage in law and society.

Women are regarded very differently from tribe to tribe. A woman's freedom is dependent upon the community in which she lives and her behaviour is often restricted by social norms. For example, in some tribes, boys may leave the home by the age of 18 or 19 whereas girls must remain within the family until marriage. In rural areas, many married women still seek their husband's permission to travel, find employment or complete routine legal transactions.

Domestic violence is not uncommon in the DRC. The DRC has historically been a patriarchal society and depending on the region it is often regarded as acceptable for men to resort to insults and violence. Women will often refute allegations of domestic violence because they see it as an extension of male authority in the home. The law does not address the issue of domestic violence and it is often viewed as a personal problem in which others should not intervene. Attitudes depend upon tribal norms and violence against women is accepted less in some regions than in others. Verbal insults within a domestic context are not viewed as abuse and there may be difficulties in changing attitudes towards this.

Sexual violence against women was used as a weapon of war by rebels and soldiers of all sides during the civil war. Rape, deliberate infection with HIV/Aids, abduction and sexual slavery were widely reported. The UN estimated that around 5,000 women were raped in South-Kivu from October 2002 to February 2003.⁶ Sexual violence against women still continues.

⁶ *Amnesty International Report 2004*, p.43, at: www.web.amnesty.org/report2004/cod-summary-eng

Role of men

Men are responsible for protecting the family and for providing them with goods and services that cannot be produced in the home, such as household products, market goods, clothes, healthcare and transportation. Men are therefore regarded as the principle earners and usually manage the household finances.

Judged by Western standards, there is not much equality between the sexes and men do not regard women as their equals in terms of employment or decision-making. Men make the major decisions in the family and women are expected to follow them even if it is acknowledged that this is unfair.

Men and women have designated gender roles that dictate what they do in the home and community. Understandably, there is difficulty in translating such roles into British society as this constitutes a major change in the family dynamic.

Relationships and marriage

In the DRC, the legal age for marriage is 18 although in rural areas it is common for girls to be prepared for marriage at a much earlier age. In the cities, the average age for marriage is around 30 to 35 for men and in the mid-twenties for women. Financial security is also a deciding factor. Polygamy is illegal but the practice continues.

It is customary for the groom to pay a dowry to the bride's family for her hand in marriage. The agreement of both sets of parents and the acceptance of this gift are regarded as the real seal between the two partners, and legal and religious services are regarded as formalities.

Marriage customs vary depending on tribal traditions. The whole family is involved in the process and must be considered. In some cases, people are prohibited from marrying members of certain other groups due to previous marriage failure or tribal conflict. It was formerly customary for parents to arrange marriages for their children but people today have more freedom of choice. If a couple are committed to each other, then families tend to respect this.

Divorce is not common in the DRC because marriage is seen as a union between two families and divorce therefore divides communities. Religious beliefs also have an impact. Negotiation, mediated by family members, is a preferred solution and divorce will only be allowed in extreme circumstances. However, it does occur, especially in cities, and is accepted if there is a compelling reason.

Although homosexuality is legal in the DRC it is not discussed and is considered a sin. Homosexuals are thought to bring shame on the family and so are excluded from the community. In the UK, the discussion of same sex relations in the context of sex education may make some Congolese people feel uncomfortable.

Children and childcare

The average number of children in a household is between four and six but some men will father upward of seven children with different partners. Children of the same gender are used to sharing a room or even a bed.

Children are a shared responsibility, to the extent that all adults are known as 'parents' within the community. It is common for people to take in their nieces and nephews and bring them up with their own children. This is important to note because the Congolese interpretation of what constitutes a family differs greatly from Western notions.

Children are usually cared for by the mother although relatives and older siblings will often help out. This is less so in cities, where couples are responsible for their own children and may employ childminders. The father's perceived role is to discipline the children and provide guidance on their upbringing and behaviour.

The community is seen as the 'broader' family and as such gives anyone the right to challenge a child's misbehaviour. There is a gender divide in disciplining children as girls are often considered children until the age of marriage. Smacking is acceptable and is regarded as part of the process of child-rearing. The Congolese are likely to be shocked that this is a contentious issue in the UK. Strong-worded reproaches are also acceptable. Children are expected to obey their elders and are not consulted on decisions made for or about them.

There has been an increase in violence against children as a result of the civil war, during which all armed groups used child soldiers.⁷ Within refugee camps children are often told to keep quiet for fear of giving away information that is dangerous to their family. Consequently, children may be affected by a general atmosphere of insecurity and fear.

The elderly

The elderly are highly regarded in the community and are treated with deference. They are consulted on matters of importance and play the role of mediators in disputes. The elderly are never referred to by name but as 'elder'.

Congolese have difficulty in understanding why the elderly in Britain are put in social care and view this as a denial of responsibility to their parents. There are no social services in the DRC and family members care for their elderly until death. Life expectancy in the DRC is around 43.5 years of age.⁸

Housing

Housing is entirely dependent upon social background and financial status. Standards of housing differ significantly between rural and urban areas. Rural homes are very basic, often lacking amenities like electricity and running water. Houses very similar to those in the UK are found in the cities, but most homes are of a low standard in comparison to the West.

Most people live in single storey houses built of brick, with roofs made of flattened steel sheets. In rural areas, houses are made of mud bricks or supports covered with mud and topped with flattened steel sheets or grass. In areas where the quality of the soil does not allow for the fabrication of bricks, houses are built of wood or stone. Lack of housing regulations has meant that homes in rural areas are built to

⁷ *Amnesty International Report 2004*, p.43, at: www.web.amnesty.org/report2004/cod-summary-eng

⁸ 2002 World Health Organisation data taken from the Home Office Immigration and Nationality Directorate, *Democratic Republic of Congo Country Report*, October 2004, Section 5.62, p.26.

individual specifications and tend to be widely spaced. Congolese who are accustomed to living in open areas may find it difficult to adjust to living in more built up areas in the UK where there tends to be limited outdoor garden space.

The Congolese climate allows for a vibrant street life and people will have to make significant adjustments to this aspect of UK culture. In the DRC, houses are viewed as a night-time refuge rather than as a place to spend the day. As an example of this, the patterned side of curtains face the street so that they can be appreciated from the outside.

Some of the refugees arriving on the Programme have previously been accommodated in very basic conditions in the Kyangwali refugee camp (Western Uganda), which houses 17,000 refugees. Other refugees were living in urban areas of Kampala city in rented rooms. Families were given the materials to make a one or two-roomed mud hut with straw roof and mud floor. There is no electricity in the refugee camp, and refugees have been given the means to grow their own crops under a self-reliance strategy operated by UNHCR Uganda.

Privacy

People have a limited concept of personal space or privacy as there is little opportunity for it in communal housing. There is a very active communal life and people are used to sharing their homes and their time with friends and relatives. For example, friends and relatives will often arrive unannounced and not think twice about inviting themselves to stay.

Social interaction

The Congolese are sociable people who greet friends and relatives very warmly. Handshaking is a common greeting, as is hugging, kissing cheeks and touching heads.

However, it should be noted that in some cases, making eye contact can be seen as disrespectful, particularly when there is a difference in age or social position. Whereas British people will often smile out of politeness during a conversation (whether the person agrees with what is being said or not), in the DRC smiling is interpreted as a sign of genuine friendship. This can lead to misunderstandings.

Congolese people are very conscientious about maintaining personal space between the sexes. Relationships are considered private and public displays of affection are frowned upon. It is worth being aware that cultural differences could lead to a misinterpretation of gestures between members of the opposite sex.

Ethnicity, language and religion

Ethnicity

There are over 200 ethnic groups within the DRC, of which the four largest tribes, Mongo, Luba, Kongo (all Bantu), and the Mangbetu-Azande (Hamitic), make up an estimated 45 per cent of the population.⁹ The main ethnic groups in the DRC client group are: Mushi, Munyabwisha, Tutsi, Hema and Muraga. Some of the client group are of mixed ethnicity.

Questions of ethnicity, citizenship and nationality are very complex. Government centralisation and the widespread use of certain languages have been influential but people are still likely to identify themselves in relation to their ethnic groups rather than to their nation as a whole. Nationality can be seen as a forced concept, as the same ethnic groups are also found in neighbouring countries, for example in, Angola, Congo Brazzaville and Burundi. Tribal names continue to be significant as a way of identifying people with their region, and social standing. For example, a Congolese person can usually identify a person's tribe by their surname.

Relations between ethnic groups vary greatly. Politicians, foreign powers and multinational companies have sought to exploit ethnic tensions in order to gain control over the country's abundant natural resources.

Language

The four main languages spoken amongst the ethnic groups of the DRC are Lingala, Swahili, Tshiluba and Kikonga. In addition to these four languages, each tribe has its own dialect. French is the official language used for education, trade and government. As a result of Belgian colonial rule, people's level of education and social status is often judged by their fluency in French. English is less widely understood but is now being taught in secondary schools.

The two main languages spoken and written by the client group are French and Swahili. Some can read and write English.

Religion

The main religious groups are Roman Catholic (50%), Protestant (20%), Kimbanguist (10%¹⁰) and Muslim (10%). A further 10 per cent follow traditional beliefs, whose customs and rituals are often merged with other faiths.¹¹ There has been a major Christian revival in recent years, which has had an impact on every aspect of life. Religious groups have also played an active role in providing healthcare, education and other services.¹²

New Year and all the major religious festivals are celebrated, as are birthdays, depending on people's financial situation. Tribes have their own ceremonies for birth, christenings, coming of age, marriage and death.

⁹ Minority Rights Group International, *World Directory of Minorities* (1997) in Home Office, *DRC Country Report*, Section 6.59, p. 46.

¹⁰ Anti-colonial belief that the prophet Simon Kimbangu was sent to remove the church from Belgian influence.

¹¹ US State Department, Bureau of African Affairs, Background Note: DRC, October 2003, at: www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2823.htm

¹² UNICEF has estimated that the Roman Catholic Church is responsible for 80 per cent of primary and 60 per cent of secondary education. HO, DRC Country Report, Section 5.88, p. 31.

Education

General

People are very aware of the importance of education. Literacy levels in the DRC, previously very high, have decreased due to the disruption caused by ongoing conflict. The US Department of State estimates 65 per cent literacy levels in French or the local language¹³. The majority of the DRC client group is literate.

Under 5s

Generally, there is no provision made for the education of under 5s in rural areas of the DRC. Some schooling is available in cities but it is limited to those who can afford it.

Over 5s

In the DRC, children start school between the ages of six and seven. The school week usually runs from Monday to Saturday with lessons scheduled in the mornings. There is one teacher per class who is responsible for teaching all subjects. Classrooms are badly equipped and it is not uncommon to see children carrying their own seat to school.

In contrast to the British school system, children in the DRC do not progress according to age but must pass an examination at the end of each term. There is often a mixture of ages within a single class. This age difference, coupled with the language barrier, can cause great difficulty when children enter the British education system.

Primary school education is free in Uganda. Due to the conflict, many of the client group children have had interrupted schooling. Based on our knowledge of the client group, all children of school age, including teenagers attended primary school in the refugee camp¹⁴ in Uganda. Those who could afford it or those who received assistance were able to attend secondary school. Most of the children will have a basic understanding of English because it is used in the Ugandan education system.

Adult education

Around half of all Congolese people have attended school and many have a Congolese National diploma, which is equivalent to GCSEs.¹⁵ There is access to university and vocational courses in cities but it is very expensive. Popular university courses are medicine, law, accountancy and social sciences. The prestige attached to attending university means that people are less inclined to do vocational courses even though this is not matched by demand in the labour market.

Most of the client group have completed their primary education and part of their secondary education, and some are graduates. The group is unlikely to know much about how the education system works in the UK but are nevertheless likely to have high expectations. They are used to paying for education in the DRC.

¹³ US Department of State, 2004, at: www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2823.htm

¹⁴ Kyangwali refugee camp in the West of Uganda or schools in urban areas of Kampala city.

¹⁵ According to US State Department figures, 42.2 per cent have received primary school education, 15.4 per cent have attended secondary school and 0.7 per cent are university educated, at: www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2823.htm

Employment and money

Occupations

The majority of people in the DRC are subsistence farmers. There is a wide range of jobs available in the cities. However, since the collapse of the Congolese government during the civil war, there have been very few opportunities.

Due to lack of resources, the equipment and training available to people in virtually every area of professional life in the DRC is likely to be of a lower standard than in the UK. Consequently, there is likely to be a skills gap, which prevents people from entering the UK workforce immediately, as well as difficulties arising from the language barrier.

Members of the client group have a variety of work experience and most were working in an urban environment in the DRC before moving to the refugee settlement in Uganda. The group includes people who have worked in teaching and nursery care, the civil service, tailoring, gardening, farming, health, and secretarial jobs. Apart from those in tailoring, most of the client group were unable to continue their former employment and have worked as peasant farmers in the refugee camp in Uganda.

Clients may experience frustration if the skills and work experience they gained back home may not help them find a suitable job in the UK. Employment is an important issue giving people an opportunity to earn their own income and to gain a sense of worth, as well as aiding the integration process.

Welfare benefits

The unemployment rate in the DRC is very high. There is no welfare or state benefit system in the DRC and it is not a concept that people are likely to be familiar with. People who are used to earning their own income are not always comfortable with receiving money from the state. Congolese people turn to the community, family and friends as their primary support mechanism and are therefore likely to be shocked by the lack of community life in Britain, which seems very individualistic by comparison.

Money

Congolese people are generally business minded and have a good understanding of monetary values. They are used to dealing with the Congolese franc, the Congolese currency and the US dollar. Budgeting could pose a problem to people who are used to subsistence living and do not need to budget for monthly or quarterly bills. As credit is easier to obtain in the UK, debt could be a problem for those who are not used to managing large sums of money.

In Congolese families, it is usually the men who manage the household finances although in recent years, there has been a growing tendency to share monetary responsibilities. Women have direct access to money in the UK, either from an earned income or state support, for example child benefit. This shift in financial empowerment may cause tension at home.

Leisure

Going out

Congolese people are outgoing and enjoy getting together for social events within the community. It is socially unacceptable for women to go to pubs or clubs alone.

Music

Dancing and music, particularly Rumba, are very important aspects of Congolese life. Music was formerly used as a means of communicating information to the community and has sometimes been used as a political tool.

Sport

The most popular sports in the DRC are football, karate and boxing but only a small number of Congolese are able to enjoy sporting activities due to a lack of facilities. Children make their own toys using materials available to them.

Communication

Mobile phones are very popular in the DRC as the postal service is unreliable and phone lines have virtually been destroyed by warfare. Mobile phones are common even in villages and are used to contact friends and relatives in Europe.¹⁶

Newspapers

Literacy levels, lack of money and a limited circulation mean that relatively few people in the DRC have access to newspapers. There are several Congolese community magazines in the UK including 'Mabe Ya Mbila', 'Grand Lac', and 'Renaissance.'¹⁷

Radio

Radios are widely used in the DRC as a source of public information. Music and faith based programmes are popular. Most radio stations are privately owned, however church radio networks are developing. The state-controlled broadcasting network reaches the largest numbers of citizens.

Television

People are familiar with televisions although reception is often very bad. There are 22 stations the majority of which are privately owned or devoted to religious programming.¹⁸ In Britain, the African station O.B.E. is available on Sky.

¹⁶ There are an estimated one million mobile phones in use according to the 2003 CIA, *World Factbook*, 1 November 2004, at: www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/cg.html#Geo

¹⁷ Many UK-based Congolese newsagents stock Congolese newspapers and magazines. In Bolton, Congolese publications can be obtained from the Grace Shop, 56 Derby Street, BL3 6HE, Tel: 0120 4388 384. Also visit: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/default.stm>, for up-to-date African news.

¹⁸ US State Department Report 2003, quoted in Home Office, *DRC Country Report 2004*, Section 6.18, pp. 36-37.

Internet

Although the Government does not restrict use, the Internet is too expensive for many people to access.

Books

Libraries are not well stocked and textbooks are outdated in comparison with those in the UK. There has been a rise in the popularity of religious texts.

Driving

Car ownership is limited and very few people will have a valid driving licence, although driving without one is not uncommon. Cars are a status symbol and are popular in Britain because they are relatively cheap to buy second hand. However, additional costs are often overlooked.

Food

Types of dishes and ingredients

When the agricultural system is not disrupted and food is distributed normally, the Congolese diet is a healthy one. People eat plenty of freshly grown produce that has a lot of flavour in comparison to the pre-packed and pre-prepared food commonly found in British supermarkets.

Coffee, sugar, palm oil, cocoa, tea, cassava (tapioca), bananas, corn and various fruits and vegetables are grown in the DRC.

The kind of food available and methods of preparation vary according to region. Popular ingredients and dishes include:

- Fufu (which has a sticky consistency and is used to scoop up sauce. It is the equivalent of mashed potato and is made with yams/plantain)
- Beans, corn, potatoes, vegetables, bananas, rice, maize, semolina/tapioca
- Cassava (a root that can be ground into flour, the flowers and leaves can also be eaten)
- Plantain (a green, fibrous, savoury banana)
- Fish (salted, smoked or dried)
- Fresh and smoked meat

Shopping

The above foods are available in African and Caribbean shops but are expensive. People enjoy spicy food and the availability of Indian spices in the UK will be a bonus.

Congolese people are not familiar with self-service supermarkets as most do their shopping in open markets.

Cooking

Most Congolese use charcoal or wood for cooking in rural areas. People are familiar with using electric cookers in the city but gas is not used in the DRC because it is too expensive.

Food is prepared in large pots from which people can share. Utensils are largely the same as in the UK, and pots and pans are often of a good quality because copper is a natural resource in the DRC. Cooking tends to be done by the women of the family so there may be a need for single men to learn to cook for themselves.

Drinks

The consumption of alcohol is culturally acceptable although the Muslim population, as in the UK, does not drink it. Soft drinks and beer are popular beverages. In comparison to the DRC, alcohol is very expensive in the UK.

Health

Provision for health care in the DRC is minimal and people cannot expect to rely on help from the state. If people fall ill they will tend to seek help locally, if at all, and some will also resort to traditional remedies. People expect to pay for health care as hospitals in the DRC are run for profit. As a result, many often fail to receive treatment because they cannot afford it, resulting in premature illness or death.

Medical professionals are acknowledged and respected, and people will seek their advice if it is available to them. People are usually content to be seen by both female and male doctors. It is very important that people are aware of the health services and support available to them in the UK.

Physical health

Generally speaking, Congolese people are physically fit because they do not lead a sedentary life. However, the physical hardship that many have endured has contributed to health problems.

Mental health

Mental illness is regarded as a curse in the DRC and is not something that is openly discussed. There is a widespread belief that it is caused by people's actions rather than by problems in their life or trauma that they have experienced.

Sexual health

People consider sexual relations to be an intensely private matter. An unwillingness to discuss sex openly has made sexual health problems a taboo subject. People have a limited awareness of sexually transmitted diseases. HIV and AIDS affects 1.3 to 6 per cent of the population in the DRC and people affected are often ostracised.

Sex before marriage is considered to be a sin but double standards exist and it is acceptable for a man to have pre-marital sexual relations. Yet again, attitudes vary according to tribe.

Contraception is not often used, particularly in rural areas and some church leaders are opposed to it because they believe that it will encourage immorality. Few people practice family planning in the DRC although people in cities are aware of it. It is considered selfish because people practising it are thought to be trying to stop the community from expanding.

Female genital mutilation is not prohibited by law but is not widespread, except amongst isolated groups in the North.¹⁹

Dental and eye care

People do not have regular dental check ups and will only consider a visit if it is an emergency. Traditionally, the Congolese have taken care of their teeth by using the roots of certain plants. People tend to have a good standard of dental hygiene

¹⁹ US State Department 2003 quoted in Home Office, *DRC Country Report 2004*, Section 6.88, p.51.

because there is little sugar in their diet. They may not be aware that they will need to take more active care of their teeth as a result of diet change.

Opticians are rare in the DRC and there is little awareness of eye care needs or facilities to treat them.

Smoking

Smoking is quite common for men in the DRC. Cigarettes and tobacco in the UK are expensive in comparison.

Hygiene and personal appearance

Personal

Congolese people have a high level of personal hygiene. People use soap to wash themselves. Although sanitary products are available in cities, they are a rarity in rural areas because of their expense. Using cloths is more common.

Laundry

Hand washing is the most common way of cleaning clothes and people are generally unfamiliar with washing machines.

Clothes

People may not be aware of the need to dress for different seasons and are not likely to have experienced cold weather.

People take a great interest and pride in their clothes and appearance. This is closely linked to people's social status and is related to the DRC's colonial past. It is very common for people to spend a lot of money on clothes. This is evident in both sexes.

People are quite modest in the way they dress and like to have clothes that cover the whole body. Men tend to be more westernised in their dressing than women.

Congolese people are generally accustomed to using and wearing watches and are familiar with clocks and calendars.

Resettlement and expectations

The following information was received from UK-based Congolese refugee community organisations in response to questions asked about their individual experiences and knowledge of resettlement and expectations about life in the UK.

The client group is likely to view life in the UK as a chance to escape from a life of fear and to improve their lives. As such, the Congolese are very hopeful about gaining employment in the UK but often become disenchanted upon arrival due to the disparities in language, education and training making it very difficult to obtain employment.

It is not only the immediate needs of the arrivals that need to be considered but also their more general and longer term needs. Client contact with UK-based Congolese refugee community organisations is vital and should be encouraged as it will help individuals to gain a better understanding of what to expect in the UK, ensure they are informed of services available to them and aid integration into the local community.²⁰ Some of the UK-based Congolese refugee community organisations are listed on the back cover of this booklet.

²⁰ Advisers should ensure that the client is aware of refugee community organisations but should not contact them without explicit permission of the individual concerned.

Further information

Amnesty International Report 2004, at:
www.web.amnesty.org/report2004/index-eng/

BBC Country Profile on the DRC, at:
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/country_profiles/1076399.stm

Reports on current events, at: www.bbc.co.uk

Congolese Recipes, at: www.congocookbook.com/c0170.html

Health information for professionals and voluntary agencies working with asylum seekers and refugees in the UK, at: www.harpweb.org.uk

Home Office, Immigration and Nationality Directorate, Country Information Policy Unit – Democratic Republic of Congo Country Report October 2004, at:
[www.ind.homeoffice.gov.uk/ind/en/home/0/country_information/country_reports.Maincontent.0045.file.tmp/DRC%20October%202004.pdf](http://www.ind.homeoffice.gov.uk/ind/en/home/0/country_information/country_reports/Maincontent.0045.file.tmp/DRC%20October%202004.pdf)
(or go to: www.ind.homeoffice.gov.uk)

Human Rights Watch, Information by country: Africa: Democratic Republic of Congo, at: www.hrw.org/doc/?t=africa&c=congo

Reuters Foundation: AlterNet, Emergencies, Africa, Congo Conflict, at:
www.alertnet.org/thenews/emergency/ZR_CON.htm

US Committee for Refugees, World Refugee Survey 2004, at:
www.refugees.org/wrs04/main.html

US Department of State, Background Note: Democratic Republic of Congo, at:
www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2823.htm

US Department of State, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Democratic Republic of Congo, at: www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2002/18177.htm

US Department of State CIA, The World Factbook, at:
www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/cg.html#Geo

Further information on female genital mutilation, at:
www.amnesty.org/ailib/intcam/femgen/fgm1.htm

For up to date news and general information about refugees in West Africa, at:
www.unhcr.org.uk

**Kongolese Centre for
Information & Advice**

453 Harrow Road
W10 4RG
Tel: 020 8964 2777
Fax: 020 8964 5351
Email: kongolesecentre@hotmail.com

Voice Of Pacification

53 Bangham Pit Road
Birmingham
B31 1ES
Email: enquiries@pacification.org

**Zairean Congolese Community
Association (Zacca-Lisanga)**

Selby Centre
Selby Road
London N17 8JL
Tel: 020 8365 1665
Fax: 020 8885 4008
Email: zaccalisanga@yahoo.co.uk

**Congolese Refugee Women's
Association**

Durning Hall
Community Centre
Earlham Grove
London
E7 9AB
Tel/Fax: 020 8534 4222
Email: crwa65@hotmail.com :

**Leeds Central African Women's
Health and Education**

9 Frankland Place
Leeds
LS7 4NT
Tel: 0113 240 4089
Mob: 07930 423 324
Email: m22patience@yahoo.fr

Union Ladies Project

30 Besant Walk
London
N7 7RG
Tel: 07944 722 212
Email: michellesafi@yahoo.co.uk

**Congolese refugee
community organisations**

**Community of Congolese Refugees in
Great Britain**

Stephen Lawrence House
90 Greengate Street
London E13 0AS
Tel: 020 8548 4073
Fax: 020 8552 1076
Email: pgpambu@aol.com

Congolese Youth Association

Unit C6
3 Bradbury Street
N16 8JN
Tel: 020 7923 0333
Fax: 0207 249 6888
Email: admin@congoyouthassoc.org.uk

Congolink

PO Box 170
Leeds
LS11 9WT
Tel: 0870 991 4490
Email: admin@congolink.com

**East Congolese Mutual Organisation
in the United Kingdom**

Suite 115, Estuary House
196 Ballards Road
Dagenham
Essex
RM10 9AB
Tel: 020 8517 2044
Email: officeEmo@aol.com

Hewa Bora Community Development

Unit M7
Shakespeare Business Centre
245a Coldharbour Lane
London
SW9 8RR
Tel: 020 7207 1602
Fax: 020 7207 4619
Email: hewabora_code@yahoo.co.uk

Registered address:
Refugee Council,
3 Bondway, London SW8 1SJ

Charity number: 1014576
Company number: 2727514

