



GHANA

Area: 92,099 square miles Population: 31,072,940

Capital: Accra **Ethnic Groups:** Akan, 47.5%; Mole-Dagbon, 16.6%;

Ewe, 13.9%; Ga-Dangme, 7.4%; Gurma, 5.7%; Guan, 3.7%; Gurunsi, 2.5%; Bissa/Mande 1.1%

Languages: English (official); Akan, 47.5%; Mole-Dagbon, 16.6%; Ewe, 13.9%; Ga-Dangme, 7.4%; Gurma, 5.7%; Guan, 3.7%; Grusi, 2.5%; Mande 1.1% **Religion:** Christian, 71.2%; Muslim, 17.6%;

traditional beliefs, 5.2% **Life Expectancy:** 64.17 years Literacy: 79.04%

Economy: Agriculture: cocoa, rice, manioc, coffee, timber; Industry: mining, lumber, light manufacturing, aluminum smelting; Exports: oil, cocoa, gold, timber, tuna, bauxite

Gini (Income Inequality) Index: 43.5 (comp.US=41.1)

Gender Inequality Index: 0.538 (Medium #138/189; comp. US=0.204 Very High)



SANKOFA, the popular Ghanaian image of a bird looking back, is associated with the Akan proverb: "It's never too late to fetch it," taken as a call to use the wisdom of the past. Proverbs constitute the spice of African languages and the advice of this one was taken to heart in 1957. When it came time to find a name for the new nation state, residents of the former British colony (the "Gold Coast") turned to the ancient state of Ghana (Wagadu), West Africa's earliest identified empire, whose own territory extended far to the north, in what is present-day Mali and Mauritania.

Weaving the Earliest History

Archaeology and oral traditions provide the lenses through which it is possible to view the long centuries of innovation and trade that connected the territory of modern-day Ghana to the wider world. Ancestors of modern Ghanaians occupied the vast West African region for more than 35,000 years. Ancient political states, such as the Bono and Mamprusi, were mostly oriented towards the northern trans-Saharan trade, providing gold, kola nuts, and textiles to the Niger River's commercial cities of Jenne, Gao, and Timbuktu for transport to North Africa, Europe, and beyond. Early cities included the famed Begho (1200-1700), Ghana's largest precolonial town. With a population of perhaps 13,000 from the fourteenth century, Begho's special town quarters included ones set aside for merchants and Muslims, and others for metal artisans and weavers.

Further engagement with world history came with the arrival of Portuguese mariners, who built Elmina ("the mine") on land rented from the coastal community in 1482. Elmina was the first of more than 70 forts and castles built by the Portuguese, Dutch, French, Swedes, Danes, English, and others. The reorientation of trade routes to the nexus of maritime markets eventually erupted in a devastating commerce in gold, ivory, and enslaved Africans. Local communities became markets for cheap, European manufactured goods. The coastal commerce created the Atlantic world economy and enriched many, including the powerful Asante Empire formed under the rule of Osei Tutu (c.1660-1717), himself a patron of the royal arts. Emblematic of the rhythms of selective cultural borrowing was the famed kente cloth, vibrant and colorful textiles made from imported silks that were systematically unraveled, their threads then rewoven locally into traditionally meaningful patterns.

The Colonial Era

Many of the societies in the Gold Coast were matrilineal (traced through females). Among the most influential women was the Asante royal diplomat Akyaawa Yikwan (fl. 1800s), called a "woman of masculine spirit" by one foreign observer. During the colonial era, the celebrated Queen Mother Yaa Asantewaa (c.1832-1921) led the armed opposition to British rule in a series of fierce battles, before being exiled to the Seychelles. The British had established a crown colony in 1874, but it wasn't until 1900 that they succeeded in defeating the Asante and cementing their control over the area's other strong kingdoms.

Although the colonial era eventually gave way to the struggles for independence, its legacy was felt for a very long time. The European presence had produced economic instability in a region rich with resources. Further uncertainties were environmental. The short or delayed rainy seasons caused hunger. The period after about 1860 onwards was a time of climatic change that intensified the variable conditions for farming. Shifting climate and vegetation zones caused upheavals across West Africa, including the Gold Coast, with repercussions that were economic and eventually political. Malaria, smallpox, yellow fever, and other diseases made inroads in the forests of the Gold Coast during the nineteenth century. Despite the challenges, a nationalist opposition movement formed by the 1920s and consolidated the broad, grassroots support in the following decades.

Birth of a Democratic Nation State

In 1957, the Gold Coast gained its political independence as the first African nation to remove the British colonizers from control over its territory. Politician and pan-Africanist Kwame Nkrumah became the Prime Minister and then the first President of the newly named nation state of Ghana in 1960. In response, the popular West African highlife artist E.T. Mensah composed a popular song "Ghana Freedom Highlife" that extolled the success of Nkrumah and the new "Ghana, land of freedom...[where] Toils of the brave have brought results."

Nkrumah immediately embarked on an ambitious agenda to turn Ghana into a showplace by building hospitals and schools and promoting development projects like the Volta River hydroelectric dam and aluminum plants. But the path was not an easy one and the colonial legacy and economic fragility carried obstacles. When Nkrumah was deposed by a military coup (with the help of the CIA), the governments that followed were marked by military interventions, political corruption, persistent drought, and a deepening economic plight. The Fanti novelist Kwai Armah, in the post-colonial novel *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968), constructed his satire on Ghana during the Nkrumah days as seen through a railroad clerk, who tries to resist corruption. He asked, "And where is my solid ground these days? Let us just say that the cycle from birth to decay has been short."

Ghana continued to struggle long after its birth. Finally, after more than two decades, on the eve of the 1979 elections, Flight Lieutenant Jerry Rawlings led a group of junior military officers to overthrow the government. After briefly relinquishing power, he instigated a second coup. Years of reforms and economic structural adjustment policies finally enabled the nation to restore its parliamentary democracy in 1992. Since then, successful multiparty elections have helped create one of the African continent's most stable democracies.

Ghana Today

Ghana has remained on the world stage. International women's rights activist Annie Jiagge (1918-1996) was a pioneering Ghanaian lawyer and Appeal Court judge. She was the principal architect of the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (1966-68). The appointment of Kofi Annan (1938-2018), a Ghanaian and the first black African to lead the United Nations as Secretary General (1997-2006), was a source of pride for many Ghanaians. Mr. Annan was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2001.

Ghana also remains a beacon for the African Diaspora. While E.T. Mensah was celebrating Ghana in West African highlife, the Caribbean musician known as Lord Kitchener composed his Trinidadian calypso expressing the wider euphoria of the continent and across the Atlantic world:

*"The national flag is a lovely scene
With beautiful colors red, gold and green
And a black star in the center
Representing the freedom of Africa."*

In 2019, Ghana celebrated the "Year of Return: Ghana 2019," a major campaign to encourage African Americans and others in the African Diaspora to return and resettle in the motherland. It marked 400 years since the arrival of the first enslaved Africans in Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619, and the beginnings of the Transatlantic Slave Trade that transported more than 12 million Africans through the "Door of No Return" to the Americas.

-----Written by Candice Goucher

Further Reading and Viewing

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