



BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

Covering 92,098 square miles (238,533 square kilometers), Ghana is about the same size as Oregon. Its three climatic zones include the southern forest belt (warm and humid), the coastal belt (warm and dry), and the northern grasslands (hot and dry). Forests and woodlands cover more than one-third of the total land area. A dam on the Volta River has created Lake Volta, the largest man-made lake in the world. Rain falls primarily between April and October. Ghana is hot and dry for the rest of the year; temperatures reach above 100°F (40°C). From late November to early January, hot, dry, and dusty harmattan winds blow across the north. Temperatures in the southeast range from 74°F (23°C) in October to 86°F (30°C) in June.

History

Ghana takes its name, though not its modern boundaries, from one of the great inland trading empires that flourished in West Africa from the fourth to the eleventh centuries AD. The university city of Tombouctou (Timbuktu—now in Mali) was part of ancient Ghana.

Portuguese traders arrived in 1471. They mined gold and established headquarters for their slave trade. The area they controlled became known as the Gold Coast, and various European powers established forts there. In 1874, Britain took control of the Gold Coast and established Accra as the capital in 1876. After years of fighting with the Asante in the interior, the British gained control of present-day Ghana in

1901. Though the Asante were defeated, they still have a king who has some influence over local and regional politics.

The Convention People's Party (CPP), under the leadership of Kwame Nkrumah, won legislative elections in 1951, and for the first time the African majority controlled the government. On 6 March 1957, Ghana became the first Black African colony to gain independence from Britain. Three years later, the country became a republic and Nkrumah was elected president. Unfortunately, his socialist policies led to a significant drop in the standard of living. While he was on his way to Vietnam in 1966, Nkrumah was deposed by a military coup. Elections were held in 1969, but the military took over the government again in 1972.

In 1979, Flight Lieutenant Jerry Rawlings, with a group of junior officers and enlisted men, overthrew the government, arrested dozens of government officials, and executed eight of them (including three former heads of state). Rawlings drafted a new constitution, held elections, and in three months turned power over to a newly elected civilian government. However, Rawlings was not satisfied with government performance and again seized power in 1981. He outlawed political parties, suspended the constitution, and appointed a seven-member Provisional National Defense Council (PNDC).

In 1988, a national assembly was established, but members could not belong to political parties. The assembly was to represent different walks of life rather than political views. A constituent assembly, composed of elected and appointed officials, later helped draft a constitution to legalize political parties and provide for elections in 1992. Rawlings won the presidential race and began to improve economic conditions.

He was credited with creating one of Africa's most stable economies, and his popularity allowed him to win a second (and, by law, final) term as president in 1996.

Rawlings's ruling National Democratic Congress (NDC) declared Vice President John Atta Mills its candidate for the 2000 presidential election. Mills lost to New Patriotic Party (NPP) leader John Kufuor, who became president in the first nonviolent transfer of power since Ghana's independence. Kufuor successfully reduced inflation and borrowing costs during his first term; he was reelected in 2004. John Atta Mills of the NDC narrowly defeated the new NPP candidate for president in December 2008 elections.

THE PEOPLE

Population

Ghana's population of 24.34 million is growing by 1.9 percent annually. While nearly the entire population is Black African, they are divided into more than one hundred ethnic groups, each with its own language and cultural heritage. Violence between these various ethnic groups is rare, although social interaction is limited and tension is sometimes significant. In many regions (especially the north), people who are not indigenous to the area live in separate sections of town called *zongo*.

The largest ethnic group is the Akan (45 percent), of which the major subgroups are the Asante (in Kumasi and the center of the country) and the Fante (in the center of the coastal region). Other major ethnic groups include the Ewe (12 percent), in the Volta region to the east, and the Ga (7 percent), in the coastal region surrounding Accra. The Adangme is the primary subgroup of the Ga. The Dagomba, Dagaaba, and Gonja ethnic groups live in the north. A few Europeans, Lebanese merchants, and some Indians and Chinese live in Ghana. The nation's two largest cities are Accra (two million residents) and Kumasi (one million). Together, Sekondi and Takoradi also have a large population. About 52 percent of the population lives in urban areas.

Language

English is Ghana's official language, partly because of the country's colonial association with Great Britain and partly because there are so many ethnic languages that no single one could effectively serve as the official language. English is used in school, business, and government. Each of Ghana's ethnic groups has a native tongue, the most significant of which include Akan (spoken by 44 percent of Ghanaians), Dagomba (16 percent), Ewe (13 percent), and Ga-Adangme (8 percent). Akan has several dialects. Its Twi dialect is the most commonly used for communication between ethnic groups. Hausa, although native to only a few Ghanaians, is understood by many northern people and is a primary language for interethnic communication.

Religion

Although nearly 70 percent of all Ghanaians belong to one of several Christian churches, and another 16 percent are Muslim, traditional African beliefs and practices play a major

role in society and are often retained regardless of other religious affiliation. At least 9 percent of the population exclusively worships according to indigenous beliefs.

This traditional faith is characterized by a belief in a Supreme Being who has created all things and has given various degrees of power to all living (animate) and nonliving (inanimate) things. Out of respect for the Supreme Being, who cannot be approached directly, Ghanaians often communicate with him through intermediaries. Intermediaries can include animate or inanimate objects, as well as ancestor spirits. It is especially common for people to seek guidance through their ancestors. Accordingly, ancestor veneration is an important aspect of Ghanaian culture. These traditional beliefs are often referred to by outsiders as animism because of their emphasis on showing reverence for living things. Many Ghanaians would not accept the term *animism* to describe their worship. Traditional faith also includes a belief in wizards, witches, demons, magic potions, and other supernatural phenomena collectively known as *juju*.

Integral to traditional worship are various rites related to birth, puberty, marriage, and death. These are performed within the family. In addition, entire towns or regions celebrate seasonal festivals, through which people honor the dead or ask for blessings.

General Attitudes

Ghanaians are warm, extremely friendly, and sociable—even with strangers. They tend to be boisterous, which makes for animated arguments and celebrations. Ghanaians generally take life at a relaxed pace, viewing time as a series of events rather than a matter of hours or minutes. "Take time" is a common phrase indicating that things need not be rushed. Tolerance and acceptance are typical individual characteristics. Group (family and community) needs take precedence over personal desires. Ghanaians show great respect to the elderly, the well educated, the wealthy, persons with royal lineage, and persons who are noted for their hard work or integrity. Ghanaians are proud of their status as the first sub-Saharan colony to gain independence from a European power. Although greatly influenced by Western civilization, the people are striving to develop a nation and culture that is uniquely African.

Personal Appearance

Ghanaian dress is generally conservative. Nearly everyone considers it important to be clean and properly dressed in public. Casual attire is the rule for most occasions, although a suit and tie or dress is required for more formal instances. Western dress is standard in most areas, but officials often wear traditional clothing for ceremonial occasions. These outfits vary by region and ethnic group. For example, Asante, Fante, and Ewe men wear *kente*-cloth (colorful woven strips of cloth) robes. In the south, men may wear *ntoma* (long colored cloth wrapped around the body somewhat like a toga). Northern men wear a *smock* (long tunic made of wide strips of rough cotton cloth that are sewn together). Muslim men generally wear colorful, long embroidered tunics over pants. Regardless of what one wears, the type of the cloth can reflect one's status. Ghanaian women usually wear a

traditional, long wraparound skirt; a separate top; and a headscarf. They wrap extra cloth at the hips or add it to the sleeves. A head cloth, if worn, often matches a woman's dress. Women generally prefer bold colors and large prints.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

A handshake is important when greeting most people, although Muslims avoid shaking hands with members of the opposite sex. Among some groups, male friends may shake hands first and, while pulling the palms slowly away, grasp each other's middle finger with a thumb and middle finger; then they snap the grasped finger. Regardless of the gestures or words used in greeting, the act of greeting another person is extremely important. To ignore a greeting or to fail to greet someone is a serious insult to most Ghanaians. Before one begins a conversation, a general greeting such as *Good morning*, *Good afternoon*, or *Good evening* is necessary. When addressing a person of higher status, one follows the greeting with *Sir* or *Madame*. When greeting a respected elder or someone of royal descent, one often bows slightly with the left hand placed behind the back.

Most greetings are in the dominant local language and are followed by questions about one's health, family welfare, journey, and so forth. Children refer to any adult who is well-known to the family as *aunt* or *uncle* (or *grandma* or *grandpa* for older people), even when they are not related. By the same token, adults of the same age might refer to each other as *brother* or *sister*, regardless of their relationship, and will use *auntie* and *uncle* for respected older people.

Gestures

Courtesy is important. Gesturing, eating, or passing items with the left hand is impolite. Among Muslims, and some other groups who often sit on the floor, it is improper to let the sole of one's foot to point at another person. It is not considered polite to place feet on chairs, desks, or tables—especially those being used by someone else. Knocking the hands together, palms up, in front of the body can mean “please” or “I beg of you.” Waving is done by moving the hand from side to side; repetitively curling the fingers with the palm faced out means “come here.” Traditionally minded Ghanaian parents consider it impolite and defiant for a child to look an adult in the eye. Friends of the same gender may often and appropriately hold hands while walking or speaking. Members of the opposite sex might also hold hands, but showing any more affection in public is less acceptable. Personal space is rather narrow in Ghana and people stand close to one another when conversing.

Visiting

In a society where friendly social relations are important, visiting plays a key role in everyday life. Friends and relatives visit one another frequently, often unannounced, and appreciate the visits of others. In some areas, people prefer to dress up and visit on Sundays. Ghanaians work hard to

accommodate their guests. Most visits occur in the home. Before entering a gate or door, one calls out *A-go*, instead of knocking, to announce one's presence. Guests bring a small gift—juice, bread, or biscuits, for example—for their hosts.

Some hosts prefer that guests remove their shoes when entering the home or certain rooms in the family compound. Guests are nearly always served water and often other refreshments. Refusing these offers is impolite. Visitors are usually welcome to stay as long as they wish. People generally avoid visiting during mealtime, but an unexpected guest would be invited to share the meal. When a visit is over, guests are accompanied to the bus stop or taxi stand or given a ride home. Leaving them on their own is considered impolite.

Eating

Ghanaians eat meals with their right hand. They wash their hands in a bowl of water before and after the meal. One scoops food and forms it into a ball with the right hand before eating it. Sometimes a ball of food is broken in half and indented with the thumb to serve as a “spoon” for soup. A burp after eating indicates satisfaction with the meal. Going to restaurants to socialize and have a few drinks is common among those who can afford it. Several ethnic and Western restaurants have opened across the country. Cheaper fare is available at open-air establishments with benches and tables where people make and sell local foods.

LIFESTYLE

Family

Some of Ghana's ethnic groups have a matrilineal family organization, in which inheritance is passed through the wife's family. Others are patrilineal. Regardless of how inheritance is passed, the oldest male leads most family organizations. He has financial responsibility for all who live with him. Extended families of three or four generations often share one household. In farming families, everyone who is old enough helps raise the crops. Boys care for the family animals. Girls carry water, clean the house, take care of babies, and sometimes cook. Adult children care for elderly parents. Elderly family members are deeply respected and exercise a great deal of influence on family decisions. Ghanaians normally sacrifice personal ambitions for the sake of the family unit.

Housing

A typical rural compound has a section of the house for the oldest male and sometimes his wife. If he has more than one wife, each will have one room for herself and her children. Additional rooms are reserved for members of the extended family. In northern rural areas, clay is used for walls and roofs. In the south, walls are made of clay but roofs are thatched. A compound usually has a surrounding wall, a central courtyard, and a kitchen structure. Most urban homes are made of cement blocks and metal roofing sheets. These homes are better at keeping out rain but can be poorly ventilated and retain the heat in warm weather. The Ghanaian

lifestyle is based on outdoor living, with cooking and socializing generally taking place in courtyards.

Dating and Marriage

Families still arrange many marriages, though children have the right to reject undesirable matches. A growing number of urban youth are adopting Westernized dating practices. Marriage in rural areas (and to some extent in urban areas) may also follow tradition, which allows a man to take more than one wife. Still, the Christian marriage with its monogamous restrictions is becoming prevalent, though married men often have girlfriends. Traditionally, the groom gives the bride's family a bride-price to indicate his responsibility for her. In northern areas, the bride-price is often four cows (equal to about two years of salary for wage earners).

Life Cycle

A woman may go to great lengths to keep her pregnancy a secret for as long as possible, often fearing that by revealing it or discussing it publicly she may expose the baby to witchcraft. Because of a high rate of infant mortality, in rural areas a child is not considered a member of society until one week old. At that time, a celebration is held at which the child is given a name and then brought out in public for the first time. Most names are religious in nature (traditional, Christian, or Muslim) or based on unusual circumstances surrounding the child's birth. Ghanaians also have day names, which are based on the day of the week on which the person was born.

Coming-of-age ceremonies vary by region. Teenage girls often take part in a series of rituals, some lasting a week, after which they are considered women and eligible for marriage. Female circumcision is outlawed but still practiced in a few areas. Boys were once put through tests of bravery, but these are no longer widely practiced. Depending on where they live, boys become men by marrying or passing a certain age.

Funerals are major social occasions, with food, alcohol, drumming, and dancing. The length of the event depends on the ethnic group and the status of the dead. Usually, there is one day set aside for the actual funeral, then another one or more days reserved for mourning and celebrating the deceased. In the north and among Muslim communities, burial is immediate; funeral ceremonies take place one week and then 40 days after burial. In other communities, the burial may be delayed to allow the family to organize the funeral rites. Death is seen as a transition to another world, often involving a journey over a hill or across a river. To help the deceased's spirit make the journey, money for food and drink is traditionally put in the coffin or tools of the person's trade are given to allow the person to earn money.

Diet

The Ghanaian diet consists primarily of yams, cassava, millet, maize, beans, plantains, and rice. A typical southern dish is *fufu* (a doughlike combination of plantains and cassava). Also common is *ampesi* (boiled yams or plantains with sauce). In the north, the average family eats two or three daily meals with *two zaafi* (a thick porridge of corn or millet; often called

"T.Z."). Ghanaians enjoy hot and spicy food, so most of their meals are accompanied by a pepper sauce. Soups and sauces are also made from palm or peanut oil. People enjoy meat, fish, or chicken with their meals when they can afford them. Ghanaians supplement their diets with a variety of tropical fruits and vegetables.

Recreation

Most Ghanaians are highly devoted to soccer, the national sport. They are also fond of volleyball, basketball, boxing, and track-and-field. People enjoy the theater, movies, cultural presentations, and music and dance festivals, where available. Ghana has its own movie industry. Radio broadcasts are very popular and create a social gathering where electricity is not available (via battery-operated radios). *Draft*, a game similar to checkers, is popular among men and children.

The Arts

The popular dance music known as *highlife* originated in Ghana and has since spread to many parts of Africa. Heavily influenced by jazz and other Western music, *highlife* typically is played by bands of guitars and horns. Traditional dance and music are performed at special festivals and funerals. Common instruments include wooden *atenteban* flutes, *balafon* xylophones, and various types of drums. Ghanaian textiles such as *kente*-cloth and *ntoma* have colorful geometric patterns and are considered to be among the most beautiful in Africa. Wood-carvers create pieces with intricate designs and inlaid bronze or bone.

Holidays

National public holidays include Independence Day (6 Mar.), Good Friday (Friday before Easter Sunday), Easter Monday, Republic Day (1 July), *Eid ul-Fitr* (the Muslim feast at the end of Islam's holy fasting month of *Ramadan*), *Eid ul-Adha* (the Muslim Feast of the Sacrifice), Christmas, and Boxing Day (26 Dec.). Boxing Day comes from the British tradition of giving service employees small boxed gifts. Today, people generally spend the day visiting friends and relatives.

SOCIETY

Government

Ghana is a multiparty democracy. The president (currently John Atta Mills) is chief of state and head of government. Parliament has 230 seats. Direct popular elections for president, vice president, and members of Parliament are held every four years; the president and vice president are elected on the same ticket. The voting age is 18. Ghana is divided into 10 regions and 110 administrative districts. Although funding is controlled by the central government, these local districts have authority over education, health, agriculture, and social welfare. Local chiefs also have influence in traditional affairs. The Asante king has no constitutional authority, but his opinions are valued and sought.

Economy

The Ghanaian economy is based primarily on agriculture,

which engages more than 50 percent of the labor force. Cacao (from which cocoa is made) is the most important cash crop, accounting for about 45 percent of exports. Other crops (corn, root crops, sorghum, millet, and peanuts) are produced for local consumption. Fishing, light manufacturing, and timber are key industries. Ghana also mines gold, bauxite, aluminum, and diamonds. World price fluctuations for these products and drought can cause economic difficulties for Ghana. Tourism is a significant source of foreign revenue. Ghana has been privatizing and modernizing its economy for years. Still, Ghana remains an essentially poor country. Corruption at the local level often hinders development, and income distribution is highly unequal. The currency is the *new cedi* (GHC).

Transportation and Communications

While Ghana's transportation system is underdeveloped, an improving bus system connects major cities. Accra's rail connections to Kumasi and Takoradi are unreliable. Most people rely on public transportation, walking, or cycling. The *tro-tro* is a crowded, but efficient and inexpensive, minibus used for short-distance travel. In the north, bicycles and motorcycles are common means of transportation.

Landline telephone service is only available in urban areas, but cellular telephones are widespread. Ghanaians follow local and international news via newspapers, radio, and television. Ghana has one national television station and several private regional stations. Mail service is often slow. Some people use the informal method of passing information: letters or messages are passed to a driver or passenger traveling in the intended direction. Internet cafés are found across the country.

Education

Schooling in Ghana has been free, although parents now bear some of the cost of materials and supplies. Although a large percentage of Ghana's national budget is spent on education, efforts so far have not improved conditions of overcrowding or underfunding. Schools are organized on three levels: primary (six years), junior secondary (three years), and senior secondary (three years). Every administrative district has at least one high school. School is taught in English, so most children basically are learning in a foreign language. This keeps many children from progressing. The adult literacy rate is lower in rural areas. Qualified students may pursue a post-secondary education at one of Ghana's five universities, at teacher-training colleges, or at trade schools.

Health

Although the government is working to increase the quality and availability of medical care, facilities are limited or understaffed outside of major cities. Malaria and other tropical diseases and the lack of clean water or a modern sewer system are serious health threats even to urban residents. Almost half of all hospital admissions come from malaria. Intestinal disorders are common. HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis are growing problems. Many people rely on herbal medicine and traditional healing. Ghanaian law recognizes traditional healing and makes it a partner of

Western medicine within the national health system. The infant mortality rate is lower than in the past but still high.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

Embassy of Ghana, 3512 International Drive NW, Washington, DC 20008; phone (202) 686-4520; web site www.ghanaembassy.org.

POPULATION & AREA

Population	24,339,838 (rank=47)
Area, sq. mi.	92,098 (rank=81)
Area, sq. km.	238,533

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	130 of 182 countries
Gender inequality rank	114 of 155 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$1,500
Adult literacy rate	66% (male); 50% (female)
Infant mortality rate	50 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	59 (male); 62 (female)

*UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2010 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).