

INTRODUCTION GHANA FLAG COAT OF ARM

Ghana, nation in West Africa, a former British colony known as the Gold Coast until 1957. That year Ghana became the first state in sub-Saharan Africa to gain political independence from European colonial rule. Drawing on tradition, the new state took its name from that of the medieval empire of Ghana, on the upper Niger River, several hundred miles to the northwest of modern Ghana. Following independence, Ghana assumed the leadership role in the African continent's struggle for national liberation.

The people of this densely populated country belong to more than 100 different ethnic groups, but Ghana has largely been spared the ethnic conflict that has torn apart many other African countries. The capital city of Accra is the largest city in the country. English is the official language of the country, but most Ghanaians also speak at least one African language.

Ghana has one of the strongest economies in West Africa, yet the country's economic base continues to be agriculture and the people remain poor. Gold mining, the production of cacao (used to make chocolate), and tourism are the main sources of revenue. Ghana was known as a source of gold hundreds of years ago. European explorers who arrived in search of gold in the 1400s and 1500s first named the region the Gold Coast.

Over 100 linguistic and ethnic groups have been identified in Ghana, and these groups have maintained a sense of ethnic identity. However, the population is classified into two major linguistic families: the Kwa and the Gur. The Kwa speakers, traditionally associated with the area south of the Volta, make up about 75 percent of the population. The major Kwa linguistic subgroup is the Akan speakers, who are further subdivided into the Ashanti, Bono, Fante, Akuapem, Akyem, and Kwahu, among others. The Ashanti and Akuapem peoples speak similar Akan dialects, collectively known as Twi. Other Kwa linguistic groups include the Nzima, Ga, Gonja, Adangbe, and Ewe.

Members of the Gur linguistic family live mainly in the northern regions of the country. The principal Gur language is Dagbane, and the major Gur ethnic groups are the Dagomba and Mamprusi peoples. Due to the similarities in the various dialects and to the increasing mobility of the population, a typical Ghanaian understands at least one of five major languages - Akan, Nzima, Dagbane, Ga, or Ewe - as well as English, which is the official language of the count.

Ghana has a total area of 238,500 sq km (92,090 sq mi). The distance from south to north is about 670 km (420 mi) and from west to east is about 560 km (350 mi). The country is bordered by Cote d'Ivoire

to the west, Togo to the east, and Burkina Faso to the north. The Gulf of Guinea of the Atlantic Ocean washes Ghana's southern shore.

Ghana is generally characterized by flat plains and gently rolling hills. Forests cover 23 percent (2005) of the country's area, while 28 percent (2003) of its area is farmed. The country is divided into five distinct geographical regions. Coastal plains stretch across the southern portion of the country, featuring low sandy beaches interspersed with saltwater lagoons. A forested plateau region consisting of the Ashanti uplands and the Kwahu Plateau is located inland, in southwest and south central Ghana. The hilly Akwapim-Togo Ranges run north to south along the country's eastern border. The Volta Basin takes up most of central Ghana. Finally, high plains characterize the northern third of the country. The country's highest point is Mount Afadjoto, at 885 m (2,904 ft), in the Akwapim-Togo Ranges.

The country's main river is the Volta, which is formed in the center of the country by the confluence of the Black Volta and the White Volta. The Volta enters the Gulf of Guinea at Ada in southeastern Ghana.

A largely agricultural nation, Ghana's most important natural resource is the soil. Of the country's total land area, 28 percent (2003) is arable or under permanent crops, and 23 percent (2005) is forested. Gold is Ghana's principal mineral resource; bauxite, manganese, and diamonds are also important. The Akosombo Dam on the Volta River provides hydroelectricity for Ghana and several neighboring countries.

Over 100 linguistic and ethnic groups have been identified in Ghana, and these groups have maintained a sense of ethnic identity. However, the population is classified into two major linguistic families: the Kwa and the Gur.

The Kwa speakers, traditionally associated with the area south of the Volta, make up about 75 percent of the population. The major Kwa linguistic subgroup is the Akan speakers, who are further subdivided into the Ashanti, Bono, Fante, Akuapem, Akyem, and Kwahu, among others. The Ashanti and Akuapem peoples speak similar Akan dialects, collectively known as Twi. Other Kwa linguistic groups include the Nzima, Ga, Gonja, Adangbe, and Ewe.

Although no exact figures on religious distribution have been provided since the 1960 census, experts believe that about 41 percent of the population adheres to Protestantism, Roman Catholicism, or independent Christian faiths; 20 percent to Islam; and most of the remainder to traditional African religions. Most Protestants belong to Methodist, Presbyterian, or Anglican denominations. A growing number of Christians belong to independent African churches that are usually organized as spiritual or Pentecostal churches. Most Ghanaian Muslims are orthodox Sunnis, and a small percentage are members of the Ahmadiyya sect.