

Introduction to Tamale and the Northern Region

Ghana, located on the coast of Africa between Togo on the east and Cote d'Ivoire on the west, is about the size of Oregon. It is divided administratively into ten regions, each headed by an appointed Minister of cabinet rank. The population of about 19 million is heavily concentrated in the south; in the three northern regions together it is only about 3.3 million. Accra, the capital, located on the Atlantic coast, has a population of at least one million. The other principal cities include Kumasi, which is the capital of both the Ashanti Region and of the ancient empire of Ashanti, and Tamale, capital of the Northern Region.



The boundaries of modern Ghana, like those of its neighbors, were determined during the colonial period by European powers who took control of the hinterlands of the commercial bases each had set up on the coast. As a British colony, Ghana consisted of the Gold Coast in the south and a semi-autonomous “protectorate” called the Northern Territories. This division corresponded very roughly to the ecological contrast

between the forested south, inhabited mostly by speakers of Akan languages, and the northern savanna, inhabited by speakers of several different language groups. In 1957, the country became independent under the leadership of Kwame Nkrumah, who renamed it Ghana. Nowadays the former Northern Territories have been divided into three Regions: Upper West, Upper East, and Northern.

Ghana is a parliamentary democracy with an executive president (currently John Kufuor) on the American model. The principal political parties are the ruling New Patriotic Party and the opposition National Democratic Congress. The national economy is growing at a rate of 5.2% p.a., but unemployment is at least 20 %. The principal exports are cocoa (45%), root crops, shea nut, gold and diamonds.

Roger S. Gocking's *History of Ghana* (2005) is concise, readable, and particularly good on 20th century history. A brief survey good up until 1994 can be found at <http://countrystudies.us/Ghana/8.htm>. The best web site, offering all kinds of information, some of it very entertaining, and affording a good sense of what Ghana is like, is <http://www.ghanaweb.com>.

North and South

The three metropolitan areas of Ghana are Accra, the capital; Kumasi, the capital of the Ashanti kingdom; and Tamale, capital of the Northern Region (pop. 350,000). The south has historically had the advantages of close contact with other continents, a higher standard of education, and a more highly developed economy; the British treated the Northern Territories as a labor reserve for the mines and cocoa plantations of the south, discouraging both education and Christian missions. Still today, most investment, both foreign and local, benefits the south, which is also where most tourists and other visitors go. You may notice that the Ghana Homepage on the web, like most websites, offers much more information about the south than about the north!

The national language of Ghana is English. The predominant languages are Twi in the south, Dagbani and Hausa in the north, but there are many others. Many Ghanaians speak several languages. Competence in English varies with educational level; schoolchildren learn English, though their parents may not speak it.

Tamale and Dagbon

Tamale is the administrative center of the Northern Region, as well as a metropolitan city in its own right and the busiest commercial center in the north. It returns three members of Parliament. The metropolitan government, headed by the Metro Chief Executive, includes an elected Assembly. Dagbani is the language of the kingdom of Dagbon, founded in the fifteenth century, which occupies roughly the northeastern half of the Northern Region. The people of Dagbon, called Dagombas in English, are the majority of the population of Tamale, which also includes many southerners and people from the other two northern regions. The population of Dagbon is said to be nearly one million, but there are many Dagombas living elsewhere in Ghana and the world. The capital of Dagbon and the seat of its king, the Ya Na, is Yendi, about 60 miles east of Tamale.

Tamale is the principal center of education in the north. It has a number of secondary, technical and vocational schools, including the Tamale Polytechnic. The headquarters of the University for Development Studies, the university of the north, are located in Tamale, although its largest campus is at Wa in Upper West.

For pictures of Tamale, and more information, see "Tamale NR" and "Tamale People."

Climate, dress and custom

Since the south is culturally different from the south, and since information about the south is more widely available on the Web and elsewhere, we will concentrate on the north, particularly Tamale. From May to October is the rainy season, which is also the agricultural season; the rain comes in heavy storms every few days. In July and August, the weather in Tamale is generally more pleasant than it is in Louisville. In other months, it may be hotter, but never cold. Government offices are usually air-conditioned, but stores and private homes are not.

Ghanaians usually dress as well as they can afford to. Europeans, both tourists and residents, tend to dress sloppily in shorts, a style that verges on the insulting. It is best to wear neat, conservative, lightweight casual clothing; for women, pants are OK, shorts and short skirts are not. There are few opportunities for swimming. Shirt and trousers are normal wear for men, sometimes jackets and ties. On some formal

occasions, and on all those defined as “traditional,” local dress will be worn. In Dagbon, that means, for men, either a smock (a heavy cotton tunic with a wide skirt), some form of Muslim dress, or a combination. For women, a three-piece set: skirt, blouse, and a wrapper, possible used as a head-tie. Fashions change rapidly; Ghanaians are happy to help you dress properly.

Ghanaians tend to know more about world affairs than Americans know about Ghana; they watch American, European and Ghanaian news programs on television. They are familiar with American manners, and normally shake hands in greeting (except that one does not shake hands with a chief!). On the other hand, each ethno-linguistic group is proud of its own culture, including greetings and courtesies, and will be eager to teach you; it is worth making the effort to learn some of them. In Tamale you will hear *Amaraaba!* “Welcome!” to which the reply is *Ngoya!*

Do not photograph individuals whom you do not know without first striking up a conversation and explaining yourself. Displays of affection in public, such as kissing and handholding, are improper.

Houses in Tamale are less lavishly equipped than American homes, especially in the matter of kitchen equipment and table furnishings. People are used to forks and spoons, but usually eat with their hands (washing water is provided). In restaurants, there is always cutlery. The menu usually offers basic European dishes; Ghanaian food may have to be ordered in advance. Bottled water for drinking is always available. For most people in Tamale, dining in a restaurant is a new and relatively expensive practice; they eat at home, or at the innumerable food stands on the street, where (according to Ghanaian authorities) the standards of hygiene may not be reliable.

Religion

The majority of people in Tamale and in the Northern Region are Muslims, of varying degrees of orthodox observance; the central mosques of three different denominations are in the center of town, with many small ones scattered about. Among Christians there is a large Catholic presence; the Assemblies of God, Baptists, Methodists, Anglicans and Presbyterians are represented, and many others. Relations between Muslims and Christians are friendly. The indigenous religion, common to the whole of the north, is centered on sacrificial offerings made at shrines marked by trees,

or by nothing at all; many people who identify themselves as Christians or Muslims also make such offerings. The central figures of indigenous religion are the *tendaanas*, priests of the Earth, some of whom are important figures in local political life. The major festival of the north, called Damba, said nowadays to celebrate the birth of the Prophet Mohammed, was originally an agricultural festival. All festivals are celebrated according to the lunar calendar.

Dagbon

The kingdom of Dagbon is said to have been founded in the 15th century by horse-riding invaders from the north. The kings of Dagbon, the Ya Nas, are members of the royal family, descendants of the founder. The son or grandson of any Ya Na aspires to one of the chiefly titles, called “skins,” reserved for them, and hopes eventually to become king. The great chiefs of Savelugu (just north of Tamale), Mion and Karaga are eligible as candidates for the kingship should it become vacant; the choice is made, traditionally, by a committee charged with consulting oracles. Commoners have their own titles too, some of them as important in the functions of the kingdom as any royal skin; the Ya Na makes appointments to all-important titles. In addition, every chief appoints elders as advisers and functionaries. The whole system is complicated and highly competitive; it is also the main source of pride in what it means to be Dagomba.

In Tamale, the principal chief is the Gulkpe Na (“Na” means chief); his principal subordinates include the Choggo Na, the chief of Choggo village, and Zo-Simli Na, the holder of a special skin created by the Tamale city government in connection with the Sister Cities link with Louisville, KY. Royals hold the skins of Bamvim, Sañerigu and Lamashegu in the suburbs of the city.

In March of 2002, the Ya Na was killed in a battle at Yendi between supporters of the two main houses of the royal family; four years later, no resolution had yet been found to the ongoing dispute over the succession. In the interregnum, vacant titles have gone unfilled, the ceremonies and festivals that are the main expression of Dagomba culture are suspended, and economic development in the north has suffered considerably. For chiefship as it was in happier times, see “A chief in Dagbon.”