

# Ghanaian Muslims

Muslims account for 25% of the population in Ghana, one of the most populous countries in West Africa. While the Christianized indigenous population accounts for 60%, the majority of the remaining population are Animists who follow indigenous African religions.

Although present in small and large groups in villages and towns throughout the country, Muslims are concentrated in northern regions. Christians live mostly in the central and southern regions. Ethnic differences are a serious source of division in the country, which is already divided along religious lines.

Although Islam arrived in North Africa for the first time in the 7th century following the conquests of Uqba ibn Nafi, its actual spread began in the 8th century through the agency of Muslim merchants who came to the area for commercial activities. In this period, Muslim Berbers were present at the junction of almost every trade route from Sudan in the east to the Mediterranean. Following the adoption of Islam by the Mandé people, who were trading partners of the Berbers, Muslim settlements began to spread from the north of Ghana.

While the activity of the Mandé helped spread Islam along trade routes, Mandé Sufis, primarily Qadiris, played an important role in the Islamization of the region. With the arrival of Hausa Muslims in the northern regions of Ghana, who were affiliated with the Tijani order, the foundations were laid for the two large orders in this geographical region. Even today, the Hausa branch has a great deal of influence on the Islamic culture of Ghana.

While the majority of the Muslim population live in northern regions, the number of southern Muslims with their own distinct historical background is not to be underestimated. Muslims in the southern regions of Ghana are mostly African Muslims who were brought here during British colonial rule from the late 19th century onward. The Kotokoli, Chamba and Basile tribes from Benin, Hausa, Fulani and Yoruba peoples of Nigeria, the Moshi of Niger and Muslims of other ethnicities who came from Burkina Faso and Mali became locals of Ghana.

Home to enough mineral resources to be given the name the "Gold Coast," from the mid-15th century onward, the region became one of the most important centers of slave trade from Africa to the West. Even though virtually all European powers had an interest in the region, the British, who had the most powerful navy at the time, invaded Ghana in 1874 and started a long period of colonization.

When the Europeans arrived, the Muslim Mali Empire was the dominant power in the region.

Jihad and dawah efforts, spreading under the influence of Osman Dan Fodio's reforms of 1804 in neighboring Nigeria, had a widespread effect. However, with the arrival of European powers, this region which includes Ghana first lost its interior unity and then its political independence.

The indigenous resistance to British rule, which caused widespread unrest in the country, was violently subdued. The demands for independence, which increased after the First World War, resulted in the emergence of new nationalist groups in the region and, an outstanding figure from these, Kwame Nkruma, led the country's struggle for independence with the support of the Muslim minority. However, when he rose to power as a national hero supported by the whole society, Nkruma's attitude toward Muslims changed.

Having achieved independence with popular support against British rule in 1957 under the name Gold Coast, the country was then renamed to Ghana. Indifferent to the Muslims' demands, Nkruma formed a puppet organization of a small group of Muslims loyal to himself, called the *Muslim Youth Congress* and, taking this group to be an interlocutor for the Muslim community, politically marginalized Muslims from other groups.

As the first Sub-Saharan African country to gain independence from colonial rule, Ghana encouraged

many countries in Africa toward their own struggles for freedom. As with other African countries, the country's fate fell into the trap of the ideological and political rivalries of the period and it entered a process of instability. The constitution that was adopted in 1992 was too late to stop the coups, internal conflicts and economic crises that had lasted until 1981. In this complex political process, the Muslim minority has always been an active participant in politics. Founded in 1938 as an educational and cultural association, the *Gold Coast Muslim Union* became a political party over time and was renamed as the *Muslim Unity Party*. Remaining a minority in Ghana today, Muslims are not always represented in the country's politics in the way that they deserve. Nevertheless, there have been times when 10 Muslim ministers were appointed during the same government.

In fact, the political activity of Muslims is related as much to their number as to the dynamics of geographic representation in the country. This is because, as with every country, an MP in Ghana is elected to represent an area, and it is impossible for another candidate to be elected in the Muslim-majority north. Although not privileged by law, Muslim representatives surpass others in the north due to the concentration of the Muslim population. An advantage of this situation is that, in this presidential system, it results in the Muslims' favor. As the vice-presidencies in Ghana are connected to geographic representation, the vice-president representing northern regions can be elected from the Muslim minority.

Muslim holidays are official holidays in Ghana. There is also the *Office of the National Chief Imam of Ghana*, an institution officially recognized by the state to represent Muslims as a religious community in the country. This institution is responsible for the religious affairs of the Muslim minority in Ghana. Dealing with political problems is generally the responsibility of representatives in parliament.

In addition to political instability, there is a serious income inequality in the country. The areas populated by Muslims are generally poor. As the southern regions, where large-scale trade and industry take place, are populated mostly by Christians, the northern regions populated densely by Muslims are home rather to minor industries of a rural and agricultural nature.

Education may be at the top of the list of problems experienced by Muslims in this country. As of now, there are over 600 Islamic institutions providing primary education and over 260 providing secondary education. However, at the high school level, where students gain awareness and the quality of education is felt most intensely, the means at the disposal of Muslims are scarce. There are about 10 schools in the country which offer education in accordance with Islamic sensibilities. Thousands of young Muslims who cannot go to one of these high schools have to receive education at schools where the Christian curriculum is applied.

Being one of the countries where missionary activity is most widespread, Ghana has a large number of young people who convert to Christianity. Many uneducated families send their children to these Christian colleges which offer attractive opportunities and high-quality education.

Despite this scarcity, Muslims try to make up for the risks posed by official institutions by resorting to private Islamic educational institutions and courses. Virtually all the groups and denominations in the country have their own educational institutions. Quranic schools built in the vicinity of mosques seem to be the most practical solution. In addition to hundreds of mosques and Quranic schools all around the country, there are courses on Islamic education offered at large urban centers.

Muslims in the country have a periodical publication and a few websites where they can have their voices heard. On Fridays, before the Friday prayer, there are a few hours of Islamic broadcasting on television. But, except for a monthly magazine and a weekly TV program, Muslims in the region are completely defenseless against hostilities and denunciatory publications targeting them.

The most significant risk threatening the interior unity of the Muslim community in Ghana is the competition between denominations that results from the difference of opinion. While people with Salafi tendencies have organized their activities into a dawah organization called the *Islamic Research and Reform Center*, in 1969, traditional Ghanaian scholars organized themselves as the *Council of Ulama and Imams*. Although denominations founded by intellectuals who were educated in Saudi Arabia started growing stronger from the 1980s onward, numerous new groups emerged in 1985, most prominently the Islamic Dawah and Research Center. With the Shiite organizations founded under Iranian influence appearing on the scene, the situation in Ghana became one of total dispute.

Today, the feeble economy of Ghana requires that it maintains strong ties with countries like Iran, Saudi Arabia and Libya. It seems that the Muslim minority in Ghana will be experiencing Middle Eastern disputes because of this economic requirement which gives the said Middle Eastern countries different areas of influence in bilateral relations.

Surface area: 238,533 km<sup>2</sup>

Population: 25,758,108

Muslim population: 25%

Capital: Accra

Official language: English