

# The Peoples Of Northern Ghana

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## ABSTRACT

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This is a detailed survey of the socio-demographic patterns of the peoples who inhabit the Northern half of Ghana.

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The author gives an account of the indigenous language patterns of the different ethnic groups, their social customs and distinctive customs.

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Among the main ethnic groups discussed in the survey are:

(1) Dagbani, Nanuni and Moore "Gurma of Northern Region;

(2) Dagaare "Wali- Birifor of Upper West Region

(3) "Frafra" Nankani, Talni, Balsa, Nabit, Ku

Grusi of Upper East Region.  
Northern Ghana comprises the three northernmost administrative regions of Ghana: the Upper West Region, Upper East Region and Northern Region. These lie roughly north of the Lower Black Volta River, which together with its tributaries the White and Red Voltas and the Oti and Daka rivers, drain the area that comprises Northern Ghana. Northern Ghana shares international boundaries with the Burkina Faso to the North, Togo to the east and Cote D'Ivoire to the lower south-west. To the south Northern Ghana shares regional boundaries with the Brong Ahafo Region and the Volta Region.

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In colonial times the area now covered by these three regions constituted the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast and were administered by a Chief Commissioner who was responsible to the Governor of the Gold Coast for its administration. The area and its people were designated as the 'Tribes of the Ashanti Hinterland' by the Gold Coast anthropologist, Capt. R.S. Rattray who wrote a two volume account on that title describing the social institutions of the communities in this part of modern Ghana. The effective colonization of this portion of Ghana came after the British had established their hegemony over the rest of the country. Ashanti it would appear had for long served as a buffer preventing direct access to the Northern parts of the country. The conquest of Ashanti at the dawn of the Twentieth century opened the way to the North. Even before then Britain had made efforts to control the area through the treaties that it made with local rulers and opinion leaders through George Ekem Ferguson. These treaties became necessary owing to a desire to control the commercial activities and the international trade that converged in Salaga in the pre-colonial period. Salaga was where savanna produce of various descriptions were exchanged for forest produce principally Kolanuts. Whoever controlled this Northern emporium of Salaga was well positioned to control and exploit the International trade. Several European powers were in contention including the Germans, the French and the British. Initially they agreed on a neutral zone that extended northwards from the White Volta-Daka confluence as far as 10°N and westward from 0° 33' E. as far as 1° 27' W. The agreement did not hold and although the British eventually came into possession of the bulk of the North, stretching up to the 11° parallel they did not control Eastern Dagbon including its capital, Yendi, the lands of the Chokosi (Anufo), the Konkomba, the Nanumba and other peoples straddling the now Ghana "Togo border in the North. These fell to the Germans. Between their defeat at the battle of Adibo in 1896 and the end of the First World War, the kingdom of Dagbon was partitioned between the British and the Germans. Unification of that Kingdom came in 1919 when Eastern Dagbon and some of the other northern parts of what used to be German Togoland were ceded to the British to be administered as part of the Northern Territories Protectorate. These parts eventually became part of Ghana after the UN plebiscite of 1957 in which most of the affected northern people voted to remain with the rest of Ghana.

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Northern Ghana today is home to a number of different peoples speaking a variety of related languages and exhibiting considerable cultural similarities. Some of these peoples claim to be autochthonous while others like the dominant or aristocratic lineages among the Dagomba, Mamprusi and Gonja claim descent from warrior immigrant groups that invaded the area and imposed their rule over the indigenous peoples. They intermarried with these peoples whose daughters they took as wives and whose languages and social norms they eventually adopted. Their traditions of foreign origin and the associated exploits remain and are recited by professional court drummers and fiddlers. These have been recorded by modern historians. Thus, in the traditional states of Northern Ghana migrant groups and indigenes coexist. On ritual occasions the differentiation may be dramatized in rituals which highlight complementation and opposition. Migrant groups, usually the conquering minority have often adopted the local languages and absorbed the social features of the indigenes among whom they found themselves. The integration has in many cases been so effective that a visitor, unless told, could not possibly guess the differences. However, in some parts the differences between royals and commoners still matter in local affairs.

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Many Northern people, though not all, had until recently facial markers that were either for ethnic and clan identification or for therapeutic and aesthetic purposes. By these marks it was possible to tell an individual's ethnic origin. Though a few old individuals still spot facial features these marks are now rare and out of vogue. In some communities traditional leaders are campaigning against facial marks.

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Much of Northern Ghana falls within the savannah vegetation belt. Rainfall is modest in many parts of the area and allows for the cultivation of cereal crops and legumes. Agriculture and agro-based industries still remain the main stay of the peoples of this zone. Varieties of millet and sorghum as well as rice are cultivated. Rice cultivation in the low lying areas close to the banks of the Volta and its tributaries is of some commercial importance. The rice industry may have declined somewhat from what it used to be in the 1970s but it still remains an important local industry. Tubers are cultivated as staples in the middle and southern parts of the area which today supplies the bulk of the country's requirement for yam. Animal husbandry has since traditional times been an integral feature of agriculture in these parts of Ghana. The industry is declining however. In addition to agriculture trade and craft production are important to the people of the Northern zone.

Since the colonial era many of the settlements of the area have developed in rural towns and even metropolitan areas. This is particularly true of the Regional capitals like Tamale (the Northern Regional capital which was also headquarters of the erstwhile Northern Territories), Bolgatanga (capital of the Upper East Region and the erstwhile Upper Region) and Wa (capital of the Upper West Region which was carved out of the Upper region). District towns have also gained in importance as commercial, administrative and educational centres. Notable among these are Bawku, a large commercial centre about 85 kilometres east of Bolgatanga, the Gonja towns Salaga (once a very famous settlement that attracted visitors from far and near), Damongo and Bole, Gonja towns, Yendi, the traditional capital kingdom and seat of the Yana, King of Dagbon, Gambaga (a historic town lying next to the seat of the Nayiri, king of Mamprugu, and also the first headquarters of the Northern Territories), Navrongo (a significant British colonial district headquarters for the West Mamprusi district and the seat of the first Catholic missionaries to the Northern Territories) and Tumu, the capital of the Sisala district. The University of Development Studies has its campuses spread between Tamale, Navrongo and Wa. Regrettably the North lags far behind the rest of the country in terms of literacy rates.

The social organization of the peoples of Northern Ghana is informed by patrilineal descent ideologies which differentiates these people from the Akans of Southern Ghana. There are however differences in the application of patrilineal norms. Corporate groups of kin or relatives exist whose members trace putative ties to common ancestors. Property rights and succession to traditional positions would be based largely on paternal ties. Sons succeed fathers or failing sons siblings succeed and inherit property. In some respects Northern peoples like the Dagomba and Gonja and a few others seem to accord more or less equal importance to relationships traced to maternal and paternal relatives. Among the Dagomba extended family groups have been identified which bring together individuals who are related by either maternal or paternal ties or a combination of both.

In many Northern Ghanaian communities marriages are exogamous and are forbidden between relatives. As a condition for the formalization of a marriage the bride or his family has to make transfers of prescribed goods and services to the parents and relatives of the bride. The quantum of goods and services and their types seem to vary between northern societies; in some communities the transfers are no more than symbolic. In some communities livestock were used and still continue to be used although this is being resented by would-be grooms.

Communities in Northern Ghana have known chieftaincy prior to the era of colonization. For peoples like the Dagomba, Mamprusi and Gonja the culture of chieftaincy goes far back in time to the 15th Century. From these sources chieftaincy as an institution has spread to other parts of the North either by persuasion as formerly acephalous peoples welcomed immigrant princes fleeing from dynastic disputes or by imposition. The British have also been responsible directly or indirectly for promoting chieftaincy in parts of the North where in pre-colonial times chiefs were either unknown or of not much importance. The Northern chief, it will be observed, sits on a pile of skins unlike his southern counterpart. It is therefore customary in Ghana to refer to the skin polities of the North where chiefs are 'enskinned' or enrobed rather than 'enstooled', as is the case in southern Ghana. In a number of respects Northern chieftaincy differs from what obtains in the south of the country. Succession is patrilineal rather than matrilineal and among the Dagomba peoples a person cannot succeed to a chiefly office that is higher than the one that his father once held in life. In a few communities (for example Gonja) offices equivalent to queen motherhoods were traditionally recognized but not in the majority of Northern communities. The office of *magazia* (a term of Hausa origin) is the local women's leader. She is elected and need not have kinship connections to the chiefs. There are however female chiefs among the Dagomba and Mamprusi groups.

In many communities the office of *tendaana* (earthpriest) coexists with that of chief. It is suggested that earthpriestships predated the institution on chieftaincy in most parts of the North. While chiefly families do not claim any autochthonous status earthpriest lineages often do. Earthpriests are essentially priestly figures who supervise ritual activities concentered on the earth. In addition to their priestly duties or as a consequence, they usually serve land owners who apportion land for building and farming purposes. These rights have been taken over by chiefs in some communities.

The traditional religious beliefs still count for much among the peoples of the North. There is frequent recourse to the ancestors and the divinities in accounting for incidents in the lives of people. Sacrifices are made to invite the intercession of the ancestors and the local gods. It is even believed that humans can themselves through witchcraft harm their neighbours and kin. However, in some of the communities Islam has taken deep roots which date back to pre-colonial times. Islam is particularly strong among peoples like the Dagomba, Mamprusi, Gonja and Wala. Not only do we find people bearing Moslem names the recognized Moslem feasts such as Eid UL Adha and Eid UL Fitr are celebrated, even if the actual celebrations are not devoid of traditional non-Islamic features and people pray faithfully five times a day, and attend the mosque on Fridays. Islam was introduced via the trade that brought Hausa and Wangara

traders to these parts. Where and when the ruling elites espoused Islam many of their subjects followed suit and Islam was on its way to becoming the religion of the state.

Christianity arrived in the decade that colonisation was introduced in the North. Of the Christian dominations the Catholics seem to dominate in the North, particularly in the Upper Regions. It is worth noting that the centenary celebrations on the coming to the North of the White Fathers, a Catholic missionary society, are scheduled for 2006. The Catholics were able to establish a firm foothold here and it would appear that the colonial policy of reserving particular areas for particular religious denominations was a factor in the predominance of certain denominations in the area.

#### The Languages of Northern Ghana

One way of identifying the peoples of Northern Ghana is through the languages that they speak. Language can be viewed as a rough guide to ethnic differentiation. A people may speak the same or similar dialects of the same language yet not see themselves as one ethnic unit. Social and cultural differences as well as traditional enmities might divide such people despite shared language. In pre-colonial times it was possible for communities to speak similar dialects and yet not have a sense of common ethnic identity.

The peoples of the Northern Regions of Ghana speak a variety of related languages. However, in spite of the closeness of their languages they did not have the opportunity to develop a pan-Northern Ghanaian linguistic medium of communication among themselves. Therefore, even today these people use several languages including English (if they are educated literates), Hausa, (for those who have lived in the bigger Northern towns where Hausa trading communities had come into existence) and sometimes Twi, (for those who have lived in Southern Ghana) as media of wider communication. Within the Districts some local languages may serve as media of communication between people who do not share the same first language or mother tongue.

Most of the languages spoken indigenously in Northern Ghana have been classified as members of the "Gur" sub-family of languages. These languages are not however unrelated to other West African languages, since Gur itself is a branch of the North-Volta-Congo group of languages which together with the Kwa group (Southern Ghanaian languages belong to this family) and several others make up the Volta-Congo sub-branch of languages found mainly in West Africa. The Gur languages are not however exclusive to Northern Ghana; many of the languages spoken in the northern parts of Cote D'Ivoire, Togo and Benin are members of the Gur branch of languages. The linguistic relationship between some of the Northern Ghanaian languages and some languages spoken in Burkina Faso, such as Moore, is so close that we can talk of the existence of mutual intelligibility. However, not all Northern Ghanaian languages belong to Gur. A number of languages such as those spoken by the Gonja people (Ngbanyito), the Nchumuru, and the Nawuri people are Guang languages and as such fall within the Volta-Comoe sub-branch of the Kwa group of languages. Although the history of the Gonja people indicates a colonization of the vast area once occupied by the Gonja kingdom by a warrior group of Mende or Wangara origin, there are very few traces of the original language spoken by the invaders of the area who came from further north under the leadership of Jakpa. Anufo (Chokosi) spoken in the northern-east corner of the Northern Region around Chereponi in the Chere-Saboba District in fact a Bia language akin to Nzema and the like. These are thus closer to the Akan languages of southern Ghana than they are to any Northern Ghana languages.

Nevertheless and in spite of the linguistic differences and similarities, these people all feel 'northern' in every way, being united by history and geography. Their interrelationships in the past have been characterized by both friendship and kinship on the one hand and enmity and antagonism on the other. Powerful and better organized groups attempted in the past to extend territory at the expense of their unorganized neighbours. Today mutual suspicions still obtain between groups. This has sometimes led to conflicts such as those that have bedeviled Nanumba-Konkomba co-existence in recent times. In recent times with the creation of a sense of wider ethnicity and nationality among once acephalous people these peoples have tended to contest the overlordship of the centrally organized peoples like the Dagomba, Gonja and Nanumba over them. Past friendships and alliance such as those that existed between the Dagbamba (Nanumba, Dagomba and Mamprusi) peoples have tended to be upheld to date. However, some formerly antagonistic peoples have since reconciled and transformed their antagonism into friendships, even quasi-kinships. For example, Gonja and Dagomba formerly arch-enemies now have a joking relationship. Peoples who probably had no awareness of kinship now realizing their connectedness have established friends and joking relationships. Sisala and Kasena, both speakers of Grusi have a joking relationship just as Dagaba people have not only institutionalized a joking relationship they now have the friendship games in Accra.

If in the absence of a better criterion for the sub-classification of the peoples of Northern Ghana, we choose to adopt a language-based scheme, then the most widespread grouping of Northern Ghanaian people would be the speakers of that group of languages commonly identified as Moore-Gurma or Oti-Volta. Within this group are the Dagbamba peoples. Oti-Volta Languages and their Speakers

Gur languages are sub-divided into sub-branches of related languages. The major sub-branches as far as Northern Ghana is concerned are the Moore-Gurma, also referred to as Oti-Volta branch of languages, and the Gur sub-branch of languages. In terms of numbers and size the Oti-Volta languages are more numerous and individually are spoken by larger populations than is the case with the Grusi languages.

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Oti-Volta includes the following groups of languages:

Gurma languages:Â Bimoba (spoken in the eastern part of the Tempene-Garu and Nalerigu districts).Â Â Konkomba (or Likpakpaln spoken to the east of Yendi in the Oti basin) and Bassari (spoken in an area east of Zabzugu close to the Ghana-Togo border).

Dagaare- Wali-Birifor:Â Â These are closely related languages which could even be described as more or less mutually intelligible dialects spoken in broad area within which are situated the districts of Lambussie-Nandom, Lawra-Jirapa, Wa and parts of the Bole district to the south of Wa town.Â Â Also closely related to these languages is Safalba (to the south of Wa in the Bole district).

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The majority of languages spoken in the Upper East Region are also Oti-Volta ones and include Frafra-Nankani, Talni, Nabit and Kusaa.Â These too are closely related and to a large extent mutually intelligible languages.

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The Dabgani-Nanuni languages spoken by the Dagomba, Mamprusi and Nanumba peoples are found in the Northern Region of Ghana.Â They are very closely related languages and perfectly mutually intelligible.Â Â The Dagbani languages are officially sponsored by the Government of Ghana and are taught in schools and used in radio and television broadcasts.

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Below we discuss some of the major ethnic groups of people in the Ghanaian North pointing out some of the features of their social structure and history.Â Â We begin with the Dagbamba peoples.

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The Dagbamba peoples

The term or ethnonym 'Dagbamba', as applied here, includes the three related ethnic units referred to as 'Dagomba', 'Nanumba' and 'Mamprusi'.Â Â The latter, by the way, also call themselves 'Dagbamba' while referring to the people known officially as 'Dagomba' as Yooba.Â Â These people's languages are very similar and are completely mutually intelligible.Â Â Nevertheless each of these groups jealously maintains its ethnic distinction and integrity.Â Â These people are united by shared myths which postulate common ancestry for their ruling estates.Â Â The myth of Na Gbewa,Â Â Â Tohazie and Gogonumbo are kept alive by them as well as the tradition which maintains that their founding fathers immigrated to what is today Northern Ghana from one of the seven banzama bakoi (Hausa for 'the pagan or bastard seven') states of Northern Nigeria.Â After settling at several places they eventually arrived in Northern Ghana.Â Â The founder of the dynasty, Gbewa, some versions of the legend maintain, first settled at Pusiga near present day Bawku.Â Â From there his children and descendants dispersed after quarrels over succession and founded their own kingdoms.Â Â These include Mamprugu, Dagbon, Nanumba and Mossi in Burkina Faso.

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The Dagbamba people (the more inclusive term is preferred here) occupy a considerable portion of the Northern Region.Â Â Â The Nanumba live to the south of the Dagomba and the Mamprusi are found to the north of the Dagomba proper.Â Â The largest of the three ethnic groups is undoubtedly the Dagomba, the people of Dagbon.Â Â Their principal traditional town and traditional capital is Yendi located about 96 km east of Tamale.Â Â Nalerigu, which lies at walking distance from the district capital of Gambaga, is the seat of the king of Mamprugu while Bimbilla is the seat of the Nanumba paramountcy and capital of the Bimbilla or Nanumba District.Â Â The most important administrative and commercial town of the Northern Region is the metropolitan centre of Tamale, formerly also the capital of the Northern territories and later the headquarters of the Northern Region.

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The Dagbamba, the people in question, are noted for their chieftaincy traditions.Â Â The culture of chieftaincy is vibrant among them and remains an emotive issue.Â Â The people's attachment to the institution accounts for the zeal with which individuals compete for chieftaincy titles.Â Â Chiefs (known in the singular as Na or Lana) are entitled to receive homage from non-chiefs or lower grade chiefs.Â Â Many minor chieftaincy titles are often in the gift of the paramount rulers and claimants may appeal to the paramount chief and his counselors to be considered for appointment to vacant titles.Â Â The kingship however has to be competed for and is now based on a gate system which allows for alternation between gates.Â Â In Dagbon there are two such gates (lineages):Â the Abudulai (Abdu) and Andani gates.Â Â This seems to have replaced or been superimposed on an earlier requirement that the legitimate candidates for succession to Yendi should be sons of kings who are holders of one of the three Dukedoms of Karaga, Mion and Savelugu (Yo Na).Â Â The Mamprusi appear not to permit direct transmission of the nayiri-ship (kingship) from father to son.

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Though most Dagbamba chiefs are males a few royal women 'daughters of kings' are appointed to a limited number of chieftaincy titles.Â Â In the case of the Dagomba, holders of lower grade titles may seek to advance to higher levels and if they succeed they might have to move from one village to another where the higher title is vested.Â Â Some titles are terminal however which means that the holders cannot aspire to higher chiefly offices than those they have reached.

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Usually among the Dagbamba peoples a person is forbidden by custom to rise on the chieftaincy hierarchy to a title higher than that attained by his father.Â Â This rule regulates the competition for chiefly office; but it can also be the source of anxiety among princes, especially when the occupants of higher titles live too long thus preventing their siblings or collaterals from accessing higher offices.Â Â It is not customary to remove chiefs from office, as happens among Akan peoples.

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The rules of chiefly succession draw attention to the patrilineal ethos of the society.Â Â Dagbamba peoples recognize

patrilineal descent. Royal and princely statuses are based on descent. But the system is also flexible enough to allow individuals the freedom to associate and ally themselves to relatives on the mother side and even to claim titles based on maternal relations. The grand sons of Dagbamba Paramounts may claim certain titles, though not the ultimate rank of Ya na. Child fosterage practices were common in the past and were based on kinship ties. The kinship system among Dagomba is more open than in the other patrilineal societies of the North. In any case a person can opt for membership of one or more kin-groups (Dang in the Dagbani language) based on maternal or paternal kinship ties to the head of the group or its other members.

The attachment of the people to chieftaincy, an office which derives from their history and traditions and has interfaces with their traditional religious beliefs, has not in any way presented them from espousing Islam. Most Dagbamba are Moslems; but their attitudes to Islam tend to be flexible and in some respects eclectic. The celebration of festivals like the Damba (the Prophet's birthday), Kpini (guinea fowl festival) and Bugum (fire festival) among others are important events in the traditional Dagbamba calendar.

The Dagbamba are farmers who cultivate grain crops – millet and sorghum, legumes and tuber crops for subsistence and for the market. They also keep livestock. Some of them are also traders. Dagbamba towns like Yendi, Gambaga, Tamale, Walewale are important commercial centres that predate colonization. Today we find a number of Dagbamba people holding important offices in the Ghanaian civil and public services and in the armed forces. The Speakers of Gurma Languages:

Living not too far from the Dagbamba people are the Konkomba, Bimoba and Basari. They live in small villages and settlements mainly to the east of the Dagbamba peoples and close to the banks of the Oti River. In the past the Dagbamba were their overlords, having subdued them in war and as a consequence driven them further eastward of Yendi which may have once been a Konkomba or Komba locality. Lacking centralized organization and native rulers capable of mobilizing the people, the Konkomba could not withstand the more powerful and better organized Dagomba and were compelled to relocate further east to make way for their powerful neighbours.

Today Konkomba have their own paramountcies, but in the past they did not and could not have formed a common front or constituted themselves into centralized political units. The Konkomba settlement was an autonomous unit in which a semblance of authority was vested in the elders of the lineage whose members were first to settle in the area. The earthpriest or ritual authorities were usually from a different lineage and this allowed for the different segments of the local community to have a role in settlement affairs. Though the lineage elders and earthpriests controlled ritual sanctions they were not rulers and did not command the obedience of the people. In reality each corporate family maintained its political identity and autonomy and its members were expected to act together to support one another in intra-community disputes. The membership of a settlement did not always remain the same as it was and still is normal for Konkomba to migrate in search of better farm lands when the old farms began to show signs of infertility. Konkomba practice shifting cultivation. They cultivate tuber crops, especially yam as a cash crop. The naming of the Accra yam market as 'Konkomba Market' testifies to their role in the production of the crop.

Saboba and Sabzugu are the principal towns of the Konkomba. They have had sizable communities in Togo as well. However, as migrant farmers Konkomba have tended to migrate further south in search of fertile lands for yam cultivation. The result is that today colonies of Konkomba can be found stretching from north of Saboba right into the Nkwatia District of the Volta Region as well as in the Brong Ahafo Region. As strangers on other people's lands they have had to pay rent for the land and this includes tribute and an acknowledgement of the authority of the peoples in whose territory they find themselves. This is true for their relations with the Nanumba and the Gonja and it has led to clashes with local authorities and their communities in areas where the Konkomba resisted the demands of the local land owners for tribute.

The Bimobaland is found to the north of the Konkomba in parts of the Gambaga and the Bawku Districts. Their main town and seat of their paramountcy is Bunkpurugu, which is now itself a District administrative capital. Like their neighbours, the Konkomba, they have communities in Togo too. And like the latter they too are patrilineal; patriliney as a descent principle governs Bimoba succession and inheritance. Traditionally bridewealth was not emphasized in the contraction of marriage. Wife-takers however worked on the farms of the wife-givers. Child betrothal marriages and sister exchanges were common in the past and are still practiced by people, though such marriages are being resisted by young women especially.

Bimoba are farmers and their main staples are grain crops and legumes. Farms may surround the compound. They keep livestock as well.

The Basari constitute a smaller group living in Ghana and Togo. Their home settlements are close to the Konkomba stretching east of Zabzugu to the Togo border. They have migrant communities around Bimbilla further south. They too are farmers like their neighbours, the other speakers of Grumah languages.

The Dagaba and Wala Peoples

Within the Upper west Region, the newest of the Regions of Ghana (it was carved out of the erstwhile upper Region in the 1980s), there are several related languages or dialects that are spoken to the west of the Sisala speaking areas.

These go by the terms Dagaari, Dagara, Wali Biriforli etc. The Dagaari language is one of those officially sponsored languages.

Culturally the communities that lie to the west of the Sisala are broadly homogeneous. This is not to deny the existence of local variations within such an extensive area. The Dagaba are found mainly, but not exclusively, in the Upper West Region of Ghana, in a number of small scale autonomous chiefdoms. Some of them can also be found in Burkina Faso (where the term Dagara seems to be current) and in northeastern Cote D'Ivoire (Birfo and Lobi). The Dagaba have been described as 'a host of related villages, lineages, and clans which do not think of themselves as a "tribe" or call themselves by one name, such as Dagaaba' (Barker 1986:71). This may be true more in the past than today. Now in Accra and other big towns can found various associations that bring elite Dagaba people in Ghana together.

Traditionally and to a large extent today, Dagaba are farmers who cultivate grains (maize, millet, sorghum and legumes) and depend on cereals as staples, they also rear livestock and grow yams where the soil and the climate conditions permit this. Both sexes have complementary roles on the farm, but as men migrate further south the bulk of the farm work falls to the women. The quest for fertile land, which is not in adequate supply in the drier parts, and paid employment takes many of the illiterate male youth to other parts of Ghana, particularly to the less populated south of the Upper West, the Brong Ahafo and parts of southern Ghana. Migration may be seasonal, in which case men leave their wives at home but it can be more or less permanent or long term for some.

In some respects their traditional kinship organization is not uniform. In some communities patrilineal norms are salient while in others patrilineal and matrilineal modes co-exist in constituting corporate kin-groups such that a dual lineal scheme can be said to inform the transmission of property and wealth.

Resources may be classified into 'movable' and 'immovable' and transmitted matrilineally and patrilineally respectively. Women inherit female property from female kin and men from their male kin. The ideology for communities has been that certain property may be inherited from parents, paternal uncles and siblings while for certain others devolution is from maternal uncles and full siblings.

The ancestral religious beliefs that have centred on the ancestors and powerful local gods have been mediated by Christianity due to the mass conversion of Dagabas in the 1930s.

Their musical traditions assign a role to the xylophone in the ensemble.

The Wala who center on the commercial town of Wa and its immediate environs are main Moslems while the majority of Dagaba, the main ethnic group in the area, either espouse Catholicism or abide by the traditional religious practices that centre around the cult of the ancestors and the minor deities. Some Dagaba communities, particularly those around the Jirapa, Lawra and Nandom areas are predominantly Catholic. The mass conversion of Dagaba to Catholicism in the 1930s proceed along side their espousal of formal education in the area. Consequently, today, the Dagaba boast of many highly educated people and professionals. The religious differences are very significant in the determination of ethnic differences between Dagaba or Dagara and Wala.

Chieftaincies have been institutionalized in some of the communities of the Upper West long before the colonization of the area. The paramountcy of Wa can boast of a succession of chiefs going far back in time and certainly predating the colonization of the area. For certain other areas, the institution of chieftaincy is of very fairly recent origin and the first chiefs may not date back much further than the time of Samori and the Zamberma slave raids. British colonization of the area came in the immediate aftermath of these events. Prior to the introduction of chieftaincies the institution of earthpriestships existed in the area. Earthpriests still exist and collaborate with lineage and clan elders and the chiefs in the administration of the local communities.

The Dagaba people are predominantly farmers. They grow sorghum and millet, groundnuts and other subsistence crops. Yams are cultivated where the soils support this. Due to the impoverishment of the land, some Dagaba youths have since the early decades of the colonial era migrated seasonally to the southern parts of the Upper West and Southern Ghana to undertake agriculture. In addition to agriculture migrants take up other employment. Dagaba from the drier Northern areas still migrate to other parts of the country to farm. They can be found in southern parts of the Upper West and sparsely populated parts of the Lower Black Volta and Brong Ahafo. The Frafra Kusasi, Nabdam, Tallensi People

In the east parts of the Upper East Region of Ghana are found a number of ethnic groups speaking very closely related Oti-Volta languages and exhibiting remarkable similarities in their cultural traditions. These are the Frafra (also called Goresi) of the Bolgatanga and Bongo Districts, the Tallensi of the Tongo District and the Nabdam of the Nangodi District. These people could pass for Frafra as far as other Ghanaians who care not so much for local distinctions are concerned. In recent times they have fudged a wider politico-social association that goes by the name BONABOTO. The Kusasi are a large, though perhaps not so homogeneous, group in the Bawku and Pusiga Districts of the Upper East.

The towns of Bawku and Bolga are now metropolitan and commercial centres. Bawku is easily the largest town in the

Region. Bolgatanga the Regional capital has developed from a tiny settlement in the 1950s to a large administrative centre today.

Unlike the Dagbamba people the peoples in question were not known to have had powerful kingdoms or systems based on strong centralised authority ideologies. They exemplified communities that anthropologists would describe as 'acephalous'. This does not mean that they lived in anarchy. If there were chiefs they were not powerful ones capable of maintaining law and authority beyond their clan. In the pre-colonial past the functionary with power and authority seemed to have been the master of the Earth, a priestly figure who wielded ritual rather than physical sanctions that derived from his/her religious role and the perceived power of the earth to punish the community and kin-groups for any violations of the laws of the land. Interestingly enough the earth forbade bloodshed. The earthpriests, *tendaana*, held sway and served as the focal point of a community's social and religious life.

In later times individuals acquired chiefships from the Mamprusi people and set up as chiefs, albeit without the full power and authority to govern as kings. In some instances exiled princes from neighbouring kingdoms were known to have presented themselves to the communities among whom they sought refuge and to have been accepted as chiefs. In many communities a contrapuntal relationship existed in which mandates and responsibilities were shared between autochthones and migrants.

Their history does not suggest that the states in this zone, such as the Dagomba and Mamprusi, actually ever subdued them nor did they succeed in incorporating them into the established empires. Villages continued to maintain their independence and clans acted as political units in the defence of their rights when these were seen to have been infringed by others. Clans might in the past exploit various alliances to secure a peaceful existence such as territorial and propinquity ties, clanship ties, joking relationships, ritual collaborations, congregational ties and others. They seemed to have maintained their independence until the era of British colonization, and the British did seem to have had a hard a hard time subduing some of these peoples.

Their independence manifested in their ability to harass traders using the pre-colonial trade routes that connected the Salaga emporium with Moshie country in present day Burkina Faso. Nevertheless, their reported 'truculence' did not stop enterprising individuals from visiting the court of the Nayiri (his title translates roughly as 'fountain source or home of chieftaincy') on their own accord and acquiring ritual prerogatives of soliciting investiture by the Mamprusi kings. Many chiefs still trek to the court of the Mamprusi king to seek installation whenever a vacancy occurs. It becomes an essential chieftaincy rite of passage for an eligible candidate (prince) to make this journey to Mamprugu and to make stops at the historical point where predecessor chiefs in this time rested on their journey to Mamprusi king's court in Nalerigu. Such chiefs, until the advent of the British who gave them effective authority backed by the might of the colonial power, were more ritual figures than effective political leaders who commanded any authority in their communities.

The absence of political centrality in the past had its down side. The acephalous peoples of the Upper East were not only free booty to the centralized states they were also at the mercy of the slave raiders who terrorized the area towards the end of the nineteenth century. To this day the memory of Samori, Gazari, Babatu and other slavers still lingers in these parts.

Much of the Upper East where these people are found is dry savannah with impoverished soils that featured granitic outcrops and lateritic profiles. The land supports grain crops – millets and sorghum, legumes and potatoes in a good year when the rains are on time and adequate in quantity. The vegetation which comprises a carpet of short grass interspersed with short trees supports livestock rearing. The population density has however been relatively thick, especially in the Frafra country. Security concerns in the past, it has been suggested, might explain the settlement pattern and the occupation of hilly areas, especially in the case of the Tallensi, who in the past sought refuge from their enemies by hiding in the Tongo hills. The slave traders operated on a considerable scale until the arrival of the British who put a stop to slave raiding. Maximum use is however made of the available land and compound farming has been the norm since time immemorial. Upper Eastern people differ in this respect from the other Northern peoples such as the Dagbamba. In the post colonial era emigration had become a coping strategy for these people; they used to migrate to the urban centres in search of jobs on the cocoa farms, the mines and wherever jobs were available.

### The Frafra People

The term "Frafra" which derives from a greeting in the local language is a term by which the people found in the Bolgatanga District and neighbouring Districts are known to the rest of Ghanaians, especially in Southern Ghana. These people might call themselves in the language as "Gorse". This leads to some confusion with the ethnonym Gurunshi by which the Kasena-Nakana are known outside their villages.

Today they are farmers cultivating grains and legumes like millet and sorghum and maintaining poultry and livestock – cattle, goats and sheep. Farms surround the compounds and land is scarce. The same plot is cultivated perennially; the use of livestock droppings and household refuse however helps to make the farms relatively fertile and able to support agriculture on continuous basis. Unfortunately Frafra country is rocky and in short supply. The Frafra are also well known for their artistic craft products: straw articles like hats and baskets as well as feather products. Their

products can be found all over Ghana in the major towns that tourists visit. Since the colonial era Frafra youth have been compelled to emigrate to the southern parts in search of menial jobs.

The Frafra people are scattered in their clan settlements each of which in former times was autonomous of the next and each under the jurisdiction of its clan elders and earthpriests. The clans which still maintain different legends of migration to their present locations are mostly exogamous. The people are patrilineal. Marriages are exogamous and high bridewealth is taken by the families of pubescent girls when marriages are contracted. The legal guardians of the girl could demand as much as four heads of cattle from the wife-takers. Perhaps as a result of the high bridewealth marriages were usually stable in the past although this did not prevent separation of the married couple. Formal divorce could imply the return of a portion of the bridewealth. In some societies how much or what is refunded on divorce depends of whether the wife has given birth to any children for the husband and how many.

The typical traditional compound homestead among these people is one that combines huts that are thatched with mud and those that are roofed with grass. Huts are circular and the grass roofing is pyramidal in shape. Compounds differ in sizes often depending on the wealth and status of the master of the compound. The average Frafra compound comprises several dwelling quarters arranged in circular format with a single gateway. These days those who can afford it are likely to roof their huts with metal sheets.

Bolgatanga is not only the main urban centre and commercial town of the Upper East, but also the main Frafra town. It has effectively supplanted the near town of Zuarungu which used to be the seat of the District Commissioner in colonial days. Bongo, the District headquarters of the Bongo District is growing in size but remains just a rural town with a spread of government buildings.

**The Kusasi People**  
The Kusasi people are found in the Bawku Districts which are inhabited by a mixture of peoples including the Kusasi themselves who are more or less the autochthonous people, Mamprusi who come over from across the White Volta in Mamprugu in the era preceding the colonization of the area and other minority groups like the Bisa or Busasi, Moshie, Moshie, Fulani and Bimoba communities. Kusasi and their neighbours who live in their midst have not been very good in recent times. It appears control of Bawku and the paramouncy located there has been the issue responsible for the sour relations and the ethnic distrust. This is in spite of the fact that for many decades the various ethnic groups have maintained good relations and ethnic intermarriages mediated by a substantial bridewealth settlement have been characteristic of the area.

The Kusasiland is divided culturally into two divisions – the western or Atoende division which lies to the west of the Red Volta the Agolle division to the east. Though Kasasi constitute a fair homogenous cultural and linguistic group, there are perceptible cultural and linguistic differences between Agolle Kusasi and Atoende Kasasi. For one thing the Atoende seem to have been more influenced by their neighbours to the west – the Nabdem.

Kusasi chiefdoms seem to be fairly recent and in the majority of cases in both Atoende and Agolle the king of Mamprugu, the Nayiri, has had a role to play in the installation of chiefs. The paramouncy of Bawku which used to be claimed by the Mamprusi is now held by Kusasi. Control has changed several times between Mamprusi and Kusasi since the time of Independence. The Kusasi are in the majority in the area. However, like most other people there are accounts that suggest that migrant groups have also overtime integrated and have come to assume Kusasi identity.

The cult of the earth and the role of earthpriests go further back in time. Kusasi traditional religion like that of other neighbouring peoples recognizes the role of the ancestors and local divinities represented by material objects like rivers, hills and forest groves in the lives of the people. Household heads have an obligation to make periodic sacrifices to the ancestors and the local gods for the prosperity of their dependents. They have traditionally celebrated the Samapiid festival in commemoration of their ancestors and for expression of gratitude to the gods for a successful year and the harvest. Today Islam and Christianity have a role in Kusasiland.

The multi-ethnic town of Bawku is easily the largest commercial town in the Upper East. Its growth has been in response to its commercial role and its attraction of traders and merchandise from Burkina Faso, Togo and beyond. Its specialities include kolanuts from Southern Ghana destined for Burkina Faso, livestock, onions and other local produce.

**The Bulsa People**  
The Bulsa people, also known erroneously in much of Ghana as the Kanjaga, are to be found in the Sandema District of the Upper East Region. Sandema is the main town in the area and the seat of the paramouncy. Bulsa are similar in many ways to the other peoples of the Region with whom they share borders, like the Kasena and Nankana people, and with whom intermarriages have been a common feature. The Buli language and the Konni language spoken to the south of Buli are both Oti-Volta languages, albeit, in the view of the comparative linguists, perhaps a little distinct from the majority of Oti-Volta languages spoken in Ghana. Buli, once mistakenly classified as a Grusi language, shares some linguistic features with its non-Oti-Volta neighbour, Kasem which lies to the north of Buli. Clearly these result from borrowing. The two groups have intermarried to a considerable extent. The traditional Bulsa person had facial markers.

The Bulsa people live in several chiefdoms which though related historically, were at one time autonomous of each



other. Today, the paramountcy is at Sandema and the other chiefdoms seem to be ranked loosely and based on ancestral legends which now serve as a kind of charter. Chiefs coexist with the tenyono or earthpriests. Each Balsa chiefdom is divided into clan-elements which are exogamous kin-groups. These perform joint rituals and in the past acted in a corporate fashion.

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Like other Upper Easterners the Balsa are cultivators growing grains and legumes on compound farms and keeping livestock and poultry. Compound homesteads are per force dispersed as elsewhere in the Upper West. Unlike their neighbours, marriages here do not depend much on bridewealth which is comparatively of lower value. Marriages are generally perceived to be less stable. Fathers nevertheless get to claim their children and the society can be described as patrilineal.

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Everywhere the typical mud thatched hut serves as a dwelling unit. Grass thatched conical buildings are not common as places for human habitation.

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### The Speakers of Grusi Languages

The Grusi languages include the following:

Kasem (spoken around Navrongo, Paga, Chiana and a number of smaller chiefdoms in the Upper East as well as in some villages of the Tumu District). This is one of the few languages that receive official sponsorship by the Government of Ghana.

Sissala (spoken in the Tumu District).

Chakali (its native communities lie to east end of the Wa district; the language is almost dying out),

Tampilma, (spoken in a 60 km. stretching from north to south along the eastern border of the Mole Game Reserve. Its communities can be found near Daboya as well as in an enclave midway between Walewale and Gambaga in the Gambaga district of the Northern Region,

Vagla is spoken in the Bole district of the Northern Region,

Deg (also known as Mo) is spoken by a group of people whose communities are located close to the Black Volta in the Brong Ahafo and Northern Regions. Kintampo and Bamboi-Longoro are some of their main towns.

The Dilo and Chala languages in the Nkwanta district of the Volta Region.

Though there is no common ethnonym for these people collectively, they may be referred to as the Grusi people. The Kasena are generally known throughout Ghana by this term, although they do not themselves use it for their ethnic group. When they do, it carries a negative connotation. Occasionally other peoples like the Sisala may answer to the term. There are legends and myths that link some of the Grusi peoples, such as the Sisala, Mo and Vagala, though a pan-Grusi identity is lacking. The wide geographical distribution of the Grusi people (from middle portions of Burkina Faso to the lower Black Volta and Brong Ahafo amounts to a dispersal, though it is difficult to identify the original home of the these languages that are spoken not only in Ghana but also in Burkina Faso and Togo.

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The people and communities that speak the Grusi languages are not necessarily culturally homogeneous or similar to each other. The Grusi languages are not as numerous as those of Oti-Volta and their communities are not generally as populous as those of their neighbours, the speakers of Oti-Volta or Mabia languages. Their territories also do not seem to constitute a contiguous block, rather they are separated by other linguistic groups or uninhabited lands or live in the midst of other communities. Groups like the Vagla and Chakali live in communities that acknowledge Gonja overrule and usually have a resident Gonja Chief living among them. The main occupation of these people is farming. They cultivate grain crops and legumes and might keep cattle, the southern Grusi grow tubers. In the case of the Kasena-Nankana the compound farming practices of other Upper Easterners are the norm. The family farms are cultivated permanently and the use of household refuse and manure makes this sustainable. The compound comprises, as elsewhere in the Upper East, a collection of mud huts connected by a wall into a circular structure with a gateway opening to the east. The huts are either roofed with tall grass or thatched with mud. The dwelling units encircle an open space in the centre where livestock (Cattle, sheep, goats and poultry) are kept in the night. Other native speakers of Grusi languages depart from this, the huts are usually mud-thatched. In the latter case the dwelling units are connected in such a way that people walk from rooftop to rooftop.

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It would appear that traditionally the Grusi peoples did not have chiefs as we know them today. Their languages do however have words for chief or chieftain and these words are by all accounts 'native' rather than borrowed words. The idea of chieftaincy cannot therefore be said to have been unknown among them. It may be that their traditional notions of chief were different from those of the Mamprusi-Dagbomba peoples. These societies did have chiefs who occupied offices that tradition suggested had been introduced from outside the community in pre-colonial times. A powerful individual with many wives and children passed for a chief. However, some of such people were made chiefs and they now have the necessary paraphernalia for the office. Elders and heads of lineages were influential in the past and some seem to have retained their influence among their kingroups. The elder and the earthpriest both had and still have ritual and secular duties.

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Grusi peoples such as the Kasena-nankana and the Sisala, perhaps all of them, are patrilineal in their ways. The

individual belongs more to his father's lineage, although he or she may have residual claims on the mother's people.Â Â Marriages are formalized through the transfer of bridewealth to the wife-givers.

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The Guans of Northern Ghana

Guan peoples are usually perceived to be southern Ghanaians.Â Â In the south they constitute minorities surrounded by Akan speaking communities.Â Â As a linguistic group Guan is a member of the Volta-Comoe sub-family of Kwa languages and closely related linguistically to Akan.Â Â However, Guan linguistic communities are also found in Northern Ghana where we have languages like Gonja, Nawuri and Nchumburu (Nchummuru)

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The Gonja People

The Gonja are the largest of the Guan groups in Ghana.Â Â Their language is one of the few officially sponsored Northern Ghanaian languages and the only Guan language to enjoy that status.Â Â The Gonja are found in the Southern parts of the Northern Region where they control a vast territory which had been conquered from weaker peoples like the Vagala, Tampulma, Mo, and other Guans etc.Â Â Even today Gonja chiefs rule over villages where the people are non-Gonja.Â Â In the past they contested with the Dagomba for control of territory.Â Â Today Gonja and Dagomba maintain friendly relations; they seemed to have made common cause in the ethnic conflicts that pitted formerly acephalous peoples against the centrally organized peoples who were once their overlords.Â Â Gonja had very brutal encounters with the Nawuri people and the Konkomba who had settled in land traditionally belonging to the Gonja.

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The rise of the Gonja Empire owes to the arrival of a band of Malian or Mande horsemen in the 17th Century who conquered the surrounding lands of the Black Volta basin.Â Â These people were not originally Guan language speakers, however, they intermarried with the local people and their descendants adopted the Guan language that all Gonjas now speak today.Â Â The society is structured on the bases of three estates "commoners, who may well be of autochthonous origin, Moslems and princes.Â Â These estates are perhaps no longer easily distinguishable due to years of inter-marriage among them.

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Though the Gonja language is a Kwa one belonging to the Volta Comoe sub-group, and individuals can be found with Akan type day names, their culture is perhaps more akin to that of the northern peoples.Â Â They are predominantly farmers and they specialize in the cultivation of root crops especially, yams and maize.Â Â They are also traders and artisans.Â Â They control the salt trade with their northern neighbours.Â Â Daboya is still famous for its production of native cloth and smocks (northern gowns).Â Â As warrior groups, in the past a predation may have suited them.Â Â The principal Gonja towns include the old market town of Salaga in the East and Damango and Bole in the West.

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Among the Gonja as in the case with the Dagomba, chieftaincy occupies an important place in their lives.Â Â All Gonjas acknowledge one paramount who resides in the village of Yabum, the Yabumwura.Â Â Succession to chiefships is based on patrilineal descent.Â Â Such offices circulate among the descendants of Ndewura Jakpa, the reputed founder of the state.Â Â The process involves rotation and circulation between village gates.Â Â Gonja society is not however exclusively patrilineal.Â Â Patrilateral and matrilineal norms are at play in the affiliation of individuals to kin-groups.Â Â Kinship fosterage was practiced in the past and may continue to some extent.

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Ethnonyms Applicable to of Northern Ghanaian Peoples and Communities

Bassari

Bimoba, Moba

Birifor, Biriforli

Bulsa, Buli

Busasi, Bisa

Busilu

Chakali

Dagaba, Dagaare

Dagomba, Dagbanli

Dega, Deg, Mo

Fra, Fri, Kasen-Fra

Frafra

Gonja, Ngbanya, Nganyito

Grune, Gurune

Gruma

Grunshie, Grushi, Gursi

Hanga

Kusasi, Kusal

Kasena, Kasem, Awuna, Achilon

Koma, Konne, Komung

Konkomba, Likpakpaln

Kotokoli

Krachi

Likpakpaln

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Lobi  
Mamprusi, Mampruli  
Mossi, Moore, Moshie  
Nabdem, Nabdam  
Nanumba, Nanuni  
Nawuri  
Nchumuru, Nchumburu  
Pasali  
Safalba  
Sisala, Sisali, Isali  
Talensi, Talni  
Tampulma  
Vagla  
Wala, Wali  
Yarsi  
Yoba, Yula, Yuli