

[Country profile: Ghana]

Spotlight on Ghana

Country overview

Ghana is located in West Africa, bordering the Gulf of Guinea, between Côte d'Ivoire and Togo. In 1957, Ghana was the first of the colonies in Sub-Saharan Africa to gain independence from the United Kingdom. After independence, the Government of Ghana under Kwame Nkrumah sought to develop the country as a modern, semi-industrialised, socialist state. In the years since 1980 Ghana has become a relatively prosperous country that has made considerable progress.

Education is considered very important in Ghana and in 1987, the government took steps to implement a free compulsory universal basic education programme, a system which takes into account the country's development needs. Ghana is culturally and historically rich and operates one of the most stable democracies in Africa. It seeks to promote the rule of law, good governance and social equity. This is within an environment of free speech and a vibrant media landscape. The relative stability and openness that has characterised the country's politics in recent years reverberates on to the economic front.

Fast facts

Full name: Republic of Ghana

Population: 22 million

Capital: Accra

Area: 238,533 sq km (92,098 sq miles)

Major/official languages: English

Major ethnic groups: Akan, Ewe, Mole-Dagbani, Ga-Adangbe, Gurma, Yoruba, Guan

Major religions: Christianity (69%), Islam (15.6%) traditionalists (8.5%), others (6.9%)

Life expectancy: 56 years (men), 57 years (women)

Monetary unit: Cedi

Main exports: Cocoa beans and products, gold, timber, bauxite, aluminium, manganese ore, diamonds, tuna, tea, coffee, copra, cut flowers, food ingredients, fruit

GNI per capita: US\$520 (*World Bank*)

Independence: 6 March 1957

Culture in Ghana

Culture overview

An analysis of the cultural situation in Ghana reveals an apparent conflict between the intrinsic values of the indigenous Ghanaian society seeking to assert itself and a national situation driven by neo-liberal economic policies that offers free reign to market forces which are essentially foreign dominated.

Challenges in the cultural sector are related to documentation, information and research. Expressions of the arts and culture are not sufficiently documented; dialogue between policy-makers and practitioners and between practitioners themselves tend to be sporadic and there is limited information on potential partners, on sources of funding and the expertise available outside the country.

Capacity development in culture is equally a major issue in Ghana. Resource improvement in management, technical expertise and funding are pressing issues necessary for optimising the potential of the industry.

A further critical challenge posed is the recognition of the symbiotic relationship between culture and development and the place of indigenous cultural values and knowledge systems in the formulation of policy as well as in the implementation of development programmes.

However, the current 'openness' of the Ghanaian political and social landscape has offered the space and terrain for enhanced creativity, exchange and dialogue between cultural practitioners, diverse ethnic constituents and people - a necessary ingredient of cultural democracy and the development of national culture. The freedom of expression and the very vibrant media industry engendered by the present democratic dispensation is an important factor contributing to this development. As at April 2007, there were some 128 radio FM stations (many of them operating in indigenous Ghanaian languages) across the country. These offer programmes and opportunities for cultural practitioners including creative artists to exhibit and showcase their work both in English and Ghanaian languages. (There are also some six television stations.)

Policy and institutional responsibility

After many years of discussion, the Cultural Policy of Ghana was promulgated in 2004. Its preamble dedicates the Policy to the, "Vision of the people of Ghana to respect, preserve, harness and use their cultural heritage and resources to develop a united, vibrant and prosperous national community with a distinctive African identity and personality and a collective confidence and pride of place among the comity of nations."

It is noteworthy that in 2006, the Government of Ghana also set up a Ministry of Chieftaincy and Culture. The existence of the National Commission on Culture (NCC) and the Ministry operating in practice with more or less the same remit (with the attendant danger of the duplication of functions at policy level) has raised concerns for stakeholders on the issue of who is ultimately responsible for the administration of culture in Ghana.

Against the background of a throbbing political and social climate in Ghana, the official institutions of culture are challenged to give real meaning to the objectives of the cultural policy and its programme imperative as well as ensure the enhancement of their own capacities, that of practitioners and the industry as a whole. A second challenge is the necessity to take advantage of the positive changes taking place in the arena of international development co-operation and to create the necessary room for synergies and strategies in deriving the maximum from the opportunities provided in the global context.

Heritage

The indigenous values which constitute a central part of the uniqueness and identity of the country's cultural heritage are under stress from non-indigenous models and lifestyles.

A number of institutions and programmes have been put in place to assert the important attributes of the country. At the official public level, institutions such as the Ghana Museums and Monuments Board, the National Folklore Board, Bureau of Ghana Languages, Kwame Nkrumah Memorial Park and the W E B Dubois Centre for Pan African Culture have been set to safeguard and promote the nation's cultural identity and its pan-African dimension.

On the civil society front, the Chieftaincy institution is key in the preservation of the traditional culture and heritage through different observations and the holding of periodic traditional festivals. Each community has one or more festivals. As festivals are grounded in the local and ethnic communities, they play a major role in the preservation and promotion of traditional arts, the transmission of cultural values to the ensuing generation and constitute an important factor of social cohesion. Beside the traditional festivals, there are multi-disciplinary events such as the biannual Pan African Historical Theatre Festival (PANAFEST), instituted in 1992 and currently managed by an independent foundation; the National Festival of Arts and Culture, also organised biannually by the NCC; and KIDDAFEST - a children's festival organised by the National Theatre and many others.

These festivals also offer the opportunity for artists to exhibit and share their art with the community and with fellow practitioners.

Repositories of the nation's traditional heritage such as traditional sacred groves, heritage treasures in royal courts, museums, mausoleums, archives, craft centres, galleries and private homes have been crucial in the maintenance of Ghana's cultural wealth and health.

Other important sectors such as culinary, clothing, architecture and health culture and their delivery systems - in their traditional and contemporary contexts - have engaged the attention of the country. There are fairly regular intervention programmes and projects by official institutions and non-state actors in this regard.

Sport, recreation and the tourism industry have received a fair amount of national profiling in recent years. There is pronounced attention for the tourism sector particularly with the determination to exploit its economic potential. This has enhanced government interest in the development of national heritage sites for example and the needed infrastructure for the sector.

The arts and creativity

The development and promotion of traditional and contemporary art, whether as community/folklore or popular, have been largely carried out in independent enterprise over the years by the artists and promoters themselves.

The institutional promotion of the arts has been difficult because of the inherent weakness and lack of resources of the institutions to do so in any sustainable manner. Apart from the opportunities offered during the periodic national festivals, very little support is available for the artists.

The spirit of independent enterprise and the development of art associations have been commendable yet challenging over the years. Apart from the First Republic (1957-66) under the leadership of Dr Kwame Nkrumah and the Convention People's Party Government, where state control and support in the administration of culture was the cornerstone of the Cultural Policy, artists and art associations have since learned to live on their own.

This has been the trend in the performing arts sector. Apart from National Dance and Theatre Companies which are state-supported, the few independent drama and dance companies have survived largely on their own enterprise over the years. The theatre industry particularly has suffered a major slump in the last two decades due to capacity difficulties and the dwindling patronage of the art form.

On the other hand, Ghanaian popular music, particularly what has come to be known as Hiplife/Rap music, has witnessed a major explosion and upsurge since the mid-1990s. This relatively new phenomenon, enjoying more media airtime, has become highly popular, particularly among the youth, capturing audiences and clearly establishing itself as a major musical movement on the cultural landscape of the country. Highlife music is still popular among the older generation, while traditional music is enjoyed predominantly in the traditional society.

The trend is similar in the visual arts industry. Artists work independently and struggle to exhibit their work. Capacity issues and more particularly the lack of galleries is a major drawback. There are very few independent galleries and they do not have the required capacity to meet the needs of the artists. The craft industry thrives essentially for the tourist market and for export.

The Ghanaian film industry, which seemed to be on the rise up to the 1990s, has suffered a major decline in the last decade due to challenges of promotion, capacity; technical competence and resources, provision of infrastructure and the availability of investment funds for the sector. There is the overwhelming domination of Nigerian video films over the Ghanaian film and video industry and these are patronised by the television stations.

Language and literacy

The book publishing industry in Ghana has not grown to proportionately match the literate population with a growing literacy rate of over 60 per cent since the 1980s. Because of the ready educational market, text book production has become the norm for the publishing houses of Ghana which is overwhelmingly dominated by multinational companies in the industry. Very little attention is paid to other forms of literature such as popular fiction and scholarly works even though writers continue to produce manuscripts and researched material.

Literature in local languages is still a major challenge in Ghana. Apart from the Bureau of Ghana Languages and religious institutions and their publishing firms (which are

interested largely in religious literature and instruction), there is very little activity in the domain. With the decline in mother-tongue literacy, incentive for writers and publishing firms to be attracted to the area is lacking.

Nine local languages are designated as government-sponsored, namely Akan, Dagaare, Dagbani, Dangme, Ewe, Ga, Gonja, Kasem and Nzema. They are supported by the Bureau of Ghana Languages, which was established in 1951 and publishes materials in them. Provision is also made in the educational curriculum for the study of the dominant language in the community at the Basic Level and this is examinable at the Basic Education Certificate Examination organised by the West Africa Examination Council. (In 2002, the Ministry of Education revised its policy on Ghanaian languages at the Basic Level with the instruction that English should be the language of instruction from Primary One to Three. This generated intense debate in the country, with an opposition to the policy led by Department of Linguistics of the University of Ghana, Legon. A comprehensive memorandum on the issue dated 16 May 2002 was issued to the government but the policy was maintained and is operational.)

Major challenges for the publishing industry include those of capacity and expertise, limited financial leverage, available market, inadequate legislation cover and the judicial muscle to protect intellectual property rights. There is also the age-long problem of the overbearing presence and domination of multinational companies in the book publishing sector in Ghana.

Sub-regional and regional networks

The necessary artistic and cultural networks in the region and sub-region that will enhance exchange, dialogue and strengthen cultural industry are virtually non-existent. As such, the economic returns and benefits of culture remain limited and the potential culture represents for tourism is under-exploited. The opportunity to redress this unfortunate situation is, however, present through networks such as the African Union and the Economic Community of West African States.

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