



Ghanaians in the New York Metro Area

QUICK FACTS:

Place of Origin:

Ghana (primarily Kumasi and Accra)

Significant Subgroups:

Akan (50%); Ga, Ewe, Hausa (the next three largest)

Location in Metro New York:

Bronx (Morris Heights, Highbridge, Tracey Towers, Parkchester); Queens (Lefrak City); New Jersey (Newark); Brooklyn (Flatbush)

Population in Metro New York:

100,000 (Community Estimate); 32,935 (ACS 2010 Total Ancestry Reported); 39,007 (ACS 2010 Born in Ghana)⁵

Population in New York City:

19,274 (ACS 2010 Total Ancestry Reported); 23,008 (ACS 2010 Born in Ghana)

Primary Religion:

Christianity (evangelical)

Secondary Religion:

Islam

Status of Christian Witness:

Greater than or equal to 10% evangelical.

Primary Languages:

Twi, Ewe, Ga, Hausa

Secondary Language:

English

Registry of Peoples Codes:

100179, 103095, 102974

Significant Notes:

More Ghanaians live in Metro New York than any other metropolitan area in the United States. The only other metro area in the US with a comparable number of Ghanaians is around Washington, DC, which, according to the 2008 American Community Survey, has 19,199 people born in Ghana.

According to the CIA *World Factbook*, around 70% of Ghanaians in Ghana claim to be Christian. This number is most likely larger in Metro New York, as most emigration took place from highly Christianized south Ghana.

As “the royal party” paraded into the rented gathering place in the Bronx, the boisterous chatter of pastors and leaders of Ghanaian churches from across the country died down. The occasion was an annual conference of Ghanaian churches in America, and due to the high percentage of Christian Ghanaians, such an event served as an important cultural marker for the people. Perhaps as much as any immigrant group in New York, the Ghanaians retain their traditional ways in America, and the arrival at the conference of the Asantefuohene (the chief of the Ashanti tribe in New York) certainly put these traditions on display. After the first members of the procession passed through, a man carrying an oversized, pink umbrella adorned with orange fringe signaled the arrival of the Asantefuohene, who wore a loose-fitting *kente* cloth robe draped over one shoulder with the other left bare.¹ Unlike Ghana, where the chiefs and kings primarily come from traditional royal families, the chiefs in America are elected every few years, often not from royal lineage. Nevertheless, they are treated as royalty and certainly have responsibilities that mimic the roles of chiefs and kings in Ghana. The elected Asantefuohene, apart from their day jobs in New York, are expected to help preserve Ashanti language and culture among the second generation, as well as settle disputes between adults. Whether it be divorce or criminal cases, many Ashanti are encouraged to settle their disputes with the Asantefuohene instead of placing themselves at the mercy of the American judicial system.² The Ashanti, who are part of the larger Akan ethnic grouping, are the largest Ghanaian ethnic group in Metro New York, and the Akan make up one-half of the close to 33 thousand Ghana-born in Metro New York (ACS 2010). However, Ghanaians are incredibly diverse, and there are up to one hundred Ghanaian ethnic groups represented in the city, with the Ga, Ewe, and Hausa being the next largest.



Photo by Joanna Johnson

When Did They Come to New York?

Declaring independence from Britain in 1957, Ghana subsequently went through several military governments and periodic economic hardships. As schooling was a focus of Ghana’s early development, many educated Ghanaian professionals and merchants immigrated to New York in the 1960s and ’70s.³ The Ghanaian population has increased exponentially since the 1980s up until the present time by taking advantage of reunification, diversity, and tourist visas.

Where Do They Live?

The concentration of Ghanaian restaurants, businesses, and churches in the West Bronx provides evidence that Ghanaians have developed a small enclave in the Morris Heights and Highbridge neighborhoods. Ghanaians also have a sizeable population in large New York City housing complexes such as Tracey Towers and Parkchester, as well as in Newark, New Jersey.

What Do They Believe?

An enthusiastic Ghanaian pastor claimed, “It is easy to start churches among Ghanaians. Almost everyone is already Christian. You just have a contact in a new place and you start a meeting.” There is no lack of Ghanaian churches in Metro New York, and denominations from Ghana are regularly starting branches in New York City. While charismatic and Pentecostal churches are the majority, the Seventh-day Adventists also have a large representation among the community. About sixteen percent of Ghanaians in Ghana are Muslim, but this number is somewhat lower in New York, as most emigration has occurred from the “Christian” south.⁴

What Are Their Lives Like?

From the illegal service worker to the former Secretary General of the UN, Kofi Annan, Ghanaians have found work in a variety of occupations. Most envision returning home to live in a house built with New York money. Ghanaians mainly organize and socialize along ethnic lines.

How Can I Pray?

Although an overwhelming number of Ghanaians regularly attend church and claim to be Christian, there is little outreach done among other ethnic groups, such as the Muslim Hausa, and ethnocentricity is the source of much conflict. Pray for humility, unity, and a sense of mission.

1. “First North American Baptist Convention,” GhanaWeb, <http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/religion/photo.day.php?ID=125012> (accessed December 19, 2008).
2. James Dao, “Ghanaians Hail a Surrogate King,” *The New York Times*, May 25, 1992, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9E0CE5DD103AF936A15756C0A964958260&n=Top/Reference/Times%20Topics/People/D/Dao,%20James> (December 19, 2008).
3. Joseph Berger, *The World in a City* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2007), 161.
4. Central Intelligence Agency, “Ghana,” *The World Factbook*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/gh.html> (accessed December 19, 2008).
5. Community estimate derived from interviews with Ghanaian association leaders and pastors.