

Gambia Overview

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Environment

The Republic of Gambia is situated in the far west of the African continent, bordered by [Senegal](#) on three sides. The country extends roughly 10 kilometres on each bank of the Gambia River, which flows to the Atlantic Ocean. Until the claim of discovery of offshore oil in 2004, The Gambia had few natural resources. The agricultural country is an exporter of peanuts, and its beaches and river attract foreign tourists.

Peoples

Main languages: English (official), Mandinka (Malinké) and other indigenous languages

Main religions: Islam, Christianity

Minority groups include Fula (Fulani, Fulbe, Peul) 288,000 (18%), Wolof 256,000 (16%), Jola (Diola) 160,000 (10%), Serahuli 144,000 (9%) and Aku 16,000-48,000.

[Note: All data comes from the 2006 CIA World Factbook, and numbers are based on its total population estimate of 1.6 million.]

The peoples of Gambia comprise two major linguistic groups. Dominant Mandinka agriculturalists, who make up 44 per cent of the population, and traders who speak West Atlantic languages. Speakers of Manding include the pastoralist Fula as well as Wolof and Jola cultivators, albeit as a second language. Although each people has its own language, Mandinka serves as a lingua franca, with Wolof often performing that role in Banjul. English is the official language.

The boundaries of Gambia are artificial; they result only from a long history of conflict among European colonial powers which almost ended with its disappearance. These boundaries prevent Gambia from having free access to its hinterland and separate the Gambian Wolof, Jola, Mandinka, and Fula people from their kin in Senegal. However, they have also created ample opportunities for contraband.

A pastoral people from the Upper Senegal River region, the Fula speak a variant of the Niger-Kordofanian language family. Fula are also known as Fulani, Fulbe and Peul. They were the dominant group in the ancient kingdom of Tekrur until its overthrow in the eleventh century. Fula then created a series of smaller states from the western segment of that kingdom where they continued to rule until the

Tukolor majority seized power and established a strict Muslim rule. Between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries a large number of Fula were involved in a series of long and complicated migrations. They were present in large numbers in the Upper Gambia region in the nineteenth century and took part in several rebellions against Mandinka overlords.

Wolof in Gambia mainly inhabit upper and lower Saloum districts, Banjul, and the northern sections of Niani, Sami, Niumi and Jokadu. The Wolof language is part of the northern subgroup of the Niger-Kordofanian family and is a commercial language spoken beyond the boundaries of Senegal and Gambia. Wolof social organization is extremely complex based upon a tripartite division of society into freeborn, low-caste people and slaves. Although many contemporary Wolof are involved in trading and urban life, the majority are agriculturists and live in villages. Historically Wolof in the area of the Gambia Protectorate had not established strong central polities before the Soninke-Marabout wars of the nineteenth century and were politically subordinate to Mandinka or Serer overlords.

A majority of Jola reside in the Foni areas south of Bintang Bolon. While Jola comprise only 10 per cent of Gambia's population, they are very close to the more numerous Diola (as Jola are called in Senegal) of Senegal's Casamance region. Their political and social organization has traditionally been village-oriented and sub-group identities are very pronounced. It is likely that Jola are among the longest-residing people in the Gambia region. Casamance, where the Senegalese Diola live today, was historically part of the Gamba River complex before being arbitrarily separated from Gambia in 1889. It was reported in the eighteenth century that although Jola paid tribute to Mandinka, they had not been completely subjugated and continued to exercise great freedom.

Serahuli form the largest group in the extreme Upper River region of Gambia, inhabiting part of the area which once was the ancient kingdom of Wuli. They are a mixture of Mandinka, Berber and Fula. Primarily farmers, they are hampered by the poor soil in the area. Until the end of the 1950s Serahuli experienced seasonal shortfalls in food.

Aku live in and around Banjul. They are predominantly Christian and are employed in business and the professions. Aku are the descendants of Africans (mainly Yoruba) in transit as slaves to the Americas who were liberated, mostly by warships or the British West Africa Patrol. They were called 'recaptives' because they were taken twice. In the 1820s and 1830s they found their way from Freetown to the Gambia and became a nucleus of a Westernized population in Banjul. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Aku came to exercise an influence in Gambia disproportionate to their number. Adopting Western lifestyles, they accepted Christianity and educated their children in Sierra Leone and the UK. Aku became successful traders, entered the civil service and in the period between 1945 and independence came to dominate many important government positions in Gambia.

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History

Before European arrival in the fifteenth century, the banks of the Gambia River had been passed from the Ghana Empire to the Songhai Empire, and finally to the Mali Empire. Over three centuries Europeans accelerated the slave trade previously driven by Arab demand, and decimated West African populations and social structures. Britain and France hotly contested the Gambia River, and defined the present borders of the territory in 1889 which were subsequently demarcated on the ground. The Gambia became a British protectorate in 1894, governed through policies of indirect rule.

The Gambia became an independent state within the Commonwealth in 1965 and a republic in 1970.

Dawda Jawara, who served as prime minister from 1962 to 1970 won presidential elections, and followed democratic principles to an extent that was remarkable for the region. In 1981 an attempted leftist military coup supported by Libya killed hundreds, but was suppressed with the assistance of Senegal. The following year, The Gambia entered into a confederation with Senegal called the Senegambian Confederation, but integration faltered and Gambia withdrew from the arrangement in 1989.

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Governance

Mandinka dominated the People's Progressive Party and Gambian electoral politics from the election prior to independence. However, Africa's oldest democracy came to an abrupt end in 1994, when Lieutenant Yahya Jammeh, a protégé of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, led a group of military officers in a successful coup. The Armed Forces Provisional Ruling Council (AFPRC) complained that Jawara was guilty of nepotism and corruption.

Jammeh, from the Jola people, served as chairman of the junta between 1994-1996. He banned all political activity and drastically curtailed media freedom. In 1996 he pushed through a constitution to set the stage for sham elections that gave him the veneer of civilian rule. Jammeh received financial support from Nigeria, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, and for a brief time publicly mooted the idea of introducing sharia law. From the outset Jammeh established close relationships with Gaddafi, Liberian warlord/president Charles Taylor and Sierra Leonean warlord Foday Sankoh. The Gambia has no diamond resources, but during the war in Sierra Leone became a significant exporter of diamonds from areas controlled by the Revolutionary United Front. Gambian diamond exports just to Belgium amounted to \$78 million in 1998 alone. Senegal viewed Jammeh with suspicion due to his sympathy for Diola separatists in Senegal's Casamance region.

Many observers regarded balloting in 2001 as largely free and fair, despite allegations that Jammeh had provided voter cards to Diola from Casamance to bolster his vote. Several opposition supporters, human rights activists and journalists were arrested immediately after the election. Draconian media laws passed in 2004, and a leading journalist who had fought the measures was shot to death two days later.

Jammeh announced in 2004 that oil had been discovered offshore in The Gambia's territorial waters, but drilling has not yet produced concrete results. For now the Gambian economy remains dependant on agriculture, tourism, contraband, and remittances from Gambians abroad.

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Current state of minorities and indigenous peoples

Ahead of September 2006 elections, as in 2001, there were again reports of President Jammeh recruiting voters among his Jola/Diola ethnic group in the Casamance region of Senegal. One Diola told IRIN News, 'There are supporting committees that work in many villages in Casamance for the re-election of Jammeh. The members of the committee come to the village on the eve of the elections by bus. Then after they have voted, they are taken back to their villages.' President Jammeh won re-election, but Commonwealth observers said that use of state resources in the campaign, open support from the security services, and unequal access for the opposition to the media may have affected the outcome. Asked at a news conference following the vote about international criticism of his media policies,

Jammeh replied, 'Let the whole world go to hell-if I have good reasons of closing down any newspaper offices I will do so.'

Jammeh's opponents have noted his reliance on Jola support in the 2001 and 2006 elections, including at least the perception (if not reality) of cheating through enlistment of Diola kinsmen in Senegal. While Jola immigration from the Casamance is welcome, it has been made clear that further Wolof immigration from northern Senegal is not desired. Moreover, it is widely believed that Jolas have been favoured in recruitment into the army. This enhanced politicization of ethnicity in The Gambia could pose a risk to Jammeh's own ethnic group, which comprises a mere ten per cent of the population. Moreover, there are some indications that particular Jola sub-groups, notably the Karoninka from the Karone islands in the Casamance, are starting to assert a separate identity.

In May 2008, Jammeh issued a public threat to behead any homosexuals still present in The Gambia after 24 hours. His pledge of 'stricter laws than Iran' on homosexuality tapped into homophobia that is rampant across West Africa.

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