



The Gambia

Country Facts

History

Due to its geographical situation the history of the Gambia is closely interwoven with that of Senegal. Archaeological excavations prove that the fertile banks of the Gambia and Senegal rivers have been inhabited since the second millennium BC. The mystical stone circles found on the north bank of the Gambia River are believed to date back to around the 4th to 8th century AC. They are thought to be built as burial sites or places of worship providing evidence of an early population. According to written traditions and documents, for example those of the Greek historian Herodotus, the trans-Saharan trade between northern and western African markets already existed in prehistoric times when North African traders had established commercial contacts with West African tribes. The Ghana Empire, which was probably founded around 600 AC by the Soninké, extended its sphere of influence westward to the valley of the Gambia River and the area became its vassal. The wealthy rulers resided in the town of Koumbi Saleh in modern-day southern Mauretania where ruins were discovered that are believed to be the capital of the ancient Ghana Empire. From there, they controlled the trans-Saharan trade, especially the trade in gold was the key to Ghana's prosperity. The empire was at its zenith in the 11th century when it extended from the River Senegal in the west to the banks of the River Niger in the east and deep into the Sahara Desert in the north. When the Almoravids, a Berber dynasty of Morocco, conquered Ghana in 1076 the first great empire in the western Sudan began to decline and never recovered from its fall. In the 13th century the young king of the Malinké tribe Soundiata Keita laid the foundation for the rise of a new empire: Mali. During his reign it stretched from the Fouta Djallon Highlands in today's Guinea to the Niger inland delta. However, the most successful and important ruler of the Mali Empire was Kankan Moussa, who set off on a pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324 stopping off in Cairo where he gave away so much gold that the Egyptian gold market crashed. During Kankan (or Mansa) Moussa's reign the Mali Empire was at its height, huge gold fields and the trade in salt and slaves were the reason for its immense wealth. At that time Mali stretched from the Atlantic Ocean in the west to the border of modern-day Nigeria. It was also a time of peace in which important historic buildings were created and architecture and art were at their peak. Kankan Moussa's successors were not able to consolidate and expand their power and at the beginning of the 15th century the Mali Empire had started to decline. The second half of the 15th century saw the rise of a new dynasty. Sonni Ali Ber, a Songhay leader, took power in 1464 and considerably expanded the Songhay territory to consolidate his supremacy in the region. By 1476 he controlled the land from the Niger inland delta to the west of Timbuktu. At his death in 1492 he was succeeded by his son Sonni Barou who was overthrown one year later by one of his father's commanders named Mohamed Touré. Touré took the title of "Askia" and founded a new dynasty of Songhay rulers who dominated the Songhay Empire for almost one century. At that time, the empire was at its zenith, Timbuktu became a celebrated center of Islamic learning and a university town and the empire's territory was greatly expanded stretching from the Senegal River in the west to modern-day Nigeria in the east. When the Moroccans invaded Songhay in 1590 it included large parts of the modern nations of Senegal, Mauretania, Mali and Niger. The Moroccan conquest only one year later led to the fall of the great Songhay Empire. In the 15th century the Portuguese reached the coast of Senegambia while searching for the sea route to India. The first Portuguese explorer, arriving at the mouth of the Gambia River in 1446, was Nuno Tristão. The Mandinka people who controlled the area, were afraid of the intruders and attacked them. A large number of the Portuguese were killed in the ambush including

Tristão, who was seriously wounded and later died from his injuries. The next explorer who was hired by the Portuguese prince Henry the Navigator, was the Venetian Alvise Cadamosto. His first journey in 1455 failed, primarily because the Mandinka effectively resisted the Portuguese advance. His second expedition, one year later, proved more successful and he finally managed to explore the Gambia River and to gain the trust of some local chiefs. This was the beginning of commercial relations between Portugal and West Africa. The Portuguese soon monopolised trade along the West African coast establishing trading stations and maintaining friendly relations with the local population.

More than one century later, in 1588, they lost their trade rights on the Gambia River to English merchants. With the opening of cotton, tobacco and sugar cane plantations and the demand for cheap workforce in the New World during the 16th and 17th centuries, the initial British interest in trading for gold, ivory, skins, etc. shifted towards the slave trade, which became a lucrative business for European, African and Arab merchants. At that time, the Courlandish duke Jakob Kettler intended to found colonies in West Africa and the Caribbean. He purchased present-day James Island which he called Jakob's Island and used it as a trade station. Later he also rented St. Mary's Island establishing several trade posts on it. However, in 1660 the islands were seized by the Dutch West India Company and thereafter they changed hands several times. In 1661, Britain took Jacob's Island back and renamed it James Island. They built a fort, Fort James, from where they exercised political and economic power along the river.

Throughout the 18th century, Great Britain and France were in constant competition with each other for hegemony over present-day Gambia and their trade companies, the Royal African Company and Sénégal Compagnie, were struggling for commercial supremacy in the region. Over the course of the Seven Years' War from 1756 to 1763, Great Britain gained all French possessions in Senegal merging them with their own territories to form the crown colony of Senegambia. However, in 1779, during the American War of Independence the French could regain their territories including James Island and on capturing it, Fort James was completely destroyed. The Peace of Paris of 1783, which ended the American War of Independence, gave Great Britain possession of The Gambia, but the French retained a tiny enclave at Albreda and took back a large part of Senegal. After having lost its American colonies, Great Britain had no reason to continue sending slaves, therefore it abolished slave trade. The British Abolition of Slave Trade Act came into force in 1807, and made it illegal to carry slaves on British ships. Nine years later, in 1816, the British founded the colony of Bathurst, later Banjul, at the mouth of the Gambia River where they established the military post of Bathurst on St. Mary's Island, which served as base for the British effort to end the slave trade along the coast. Between 1821 and 1843 all British settlements in the Gambia river valley were under the jurisdiction of the British Governor General in Freetown, Sierra Leone. At the same time, a large number of liberated slaves arrived in The Gambia, whose descendants constitute the ethnic group of the Aku. In 1850 the so-called Soninke-Marabout Wars broke out in the region under the leadership of Ma Bah, son of a Mandinka Marabout. He declared a Holy War against the Soninkes, who were mostly animists practising traditional beliefs at the same time as adhering to Islam. The aims of the Islamic clerics were not just religious, there was also a fight for power and influence which displaced religious reasons. This war made it possible for the British to gain large territories from the Soninké, who had sought their protection, and make it their colony. From 1866 till its final demise in 1888 the region was again under the jurisdiction of the British Governor General in Freetown.

Negotiations with France to exchange The Gambia for French territories in West Africa were broken up by Britain in 1876 and in 1888 The Gambia became a colony in its own right, divided into the British crown colony of Bathurst and protectorate areas. In their protectorate the British employed indirect rule, involving the use of local chiefs and not interfering directly in native authority affairs, whereas Bathurst belonged to the British crown. In 1907, The British West African Pound was introduced in both parts of the colony. Gambian troops fought with Great Britain in both World Wars. After World War II, with the colony and the protectorate heading towards independence, Great Britain invested in the economic development of its colony and the pace of constitutional reform increased. In 1951, the colonial government gave the people more rights and for the first time, a political party was formed. The struggle for independence and self-government grew, especially among the Mandinka and the foundation of parties continued until 1959, when Dawda Jawara formed the People's Progressive Party (PPP). In the same year, women got the right to vote in the Gambia. The year 1960 saw the crown colony and the

protectorate being united and a universal adult suffrage was introduced. When elections were held at the end of May 1960, candidates of different parties were elected to the House of Representatives forming a coalition, because the winner was not clear. One year later, with the support of the Fula politician Pierre Sarr N'Jie of the United Party UP, a commission consisting of representatives of all political parties was established, with the aim to push the colony for autonomy. New general elections were held in 1962, clearly won by PPP. As a result, Jawara was appointed Prime Minister and on 4 October 1963 full internal self-government was granted.

On 18 February 1965 the colony became an independent state within the Commonwealth of Nations with Britain's Queen Elizabeth II remaining as titular head of state. The new state was named The Gambia and Dawda Jawara became its first Prime Minister, serving as head of a coalition government. People's Progressive Party won the elections of 1966 as well as all successive elections until 1992. At the same time, the first tourist hotel was opened on the coast laying the foundation of the development of tourism which would become the second largest industry in the country. A referendum held in 1965 proposing to turn the country into a presidential republic failed to obtain the necessary majority required but then in 1970 another referendum was approved and as a result, on 24 April 1970 the country became a republic within the Commonwealth with the former Prime Minister Sir David Dawda Kairaba Jawara as president. As a result, the dalasi was adopted in 1971 as currency of the young republic replacing the local pound. On 24 April 1973 the town of Bathurst is renamed Banjul. A weakening of the economy and internal political problems in the late 1970s and early 1980s plunged the country into a deep crisis, which eventually led to a violent attempted coup d'état on 30 July 1981 headed by 28 year old Kukoi Samba Sanyang, leader of the banned Gambia Socialist Revolutionary Workers Party and of the National Revolutionary Council composed by members of this party carrying out the coup.

He suspended the Constitution, proclaimed the dictatorship of the proletariat and declared president Jawara to be ousted. With the help of troops from neighbouring Senegal President Jawara was able to defeat the coup leaders' forces and stay in power. Sanyang and some of his followers could flee. A state of emergency was declared which remained in force until February 1985. As a result of the aborted coup d'état, the two nations of Senegal and The Gambia formed the confederation of Senegambia in 1982. However, in 1989 the confederation was dissolved, when The Gambia withdrew from it. Jawara was re-elected in 1992, but allegations of corruption had occurred against him which led to a nonviolent coup in 1994 that ousted him after 34 years in power.

29-year-old lieutenant Yahya Jammeh, chairman of the Armed Forces Provisional Ruling Council (AFPRC), toppled Jawara's regime and became head of state. Jawara escaped to exile in Senegal and later to Great Britain. When Jammeh announced that the state of emergency would remain until 1998 with him in power he faced international protest and sanctions which made him decide to declare that elections would be held in 1996. Jammeh and his newly founded party, the Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction (APRC), won the elections. He was sworn into office as President of the Republic of the Gambia on November 6, 1996. The APRC won 26 of 45 seats in the 2 January 1997 National Assembly election. Jammeh also won the 2001 presidential elections with 52.8% of the popular vote. He is still the current President of The Gambia today, although he has experienced several attempted coups against his regime, the last one took place in the night of 30 December 2014.

Population

Current estimates put the population at about 2 million inhabitants (estimation of 2015), divided among 12 ethnic groups: The largest group is the Mandinka, also called Mandingo or Malinké, making up about 40 %. They are followed by the Fula (18,8%), also known as Peulh or Fulbe, the Wolof (14,6%) and the Diola or Jola (10,6%). Other smaller groups include the Serahuli also called Soninké, Serer, Aku, Manjago, Bambara, Balanta, and Hausa. The Malinké are descendants of the rulers of the Mali Empire found in many West African countries including Mali, Ivory Coast, Sierra Leone, Guinea and others. They are predominantly farmers. The Fula (also known as Peulh or Fulbe) are a nomadic or semi-nomadic tribe, they are found all over the country with their huge herds of cattle. The Wolof, the major ethnic group in Senegal, are a minority in Gambia, however they form an ethnic plurality in Gambia's capital of Banjul. Other ethnic groups in the Gambia include the Diola or Jola in the Gambia river valley practising wet-rice

cultivation. They are also found in the northern part of Guinea-Bissau and in the Casamance region in Senegal. A small but significant ethnic group are the Aku who live only in Gambia. They are descendants of freed slaves who established a settlement in Bathurst, today's Banjul, in the 19th century. The Bambara people are a minority in The Gambia originally coming from neighbouring Mali. Other minority tribes include the Soninké, also known as Serahuli, descendants of the founders of the great Ghana Empire.

Religions

About 90% of The Gambia's population is Muslim; Christians constitute about 9 % and about 1 % of the population practise traditional beliefs. The majority of the Christians are Catholics, but there are also Methodists, Baptists and Anglicans. The country's largest ethnic group, the Mandinka, are mostly Muslim, ebenso wie die Peulh und Wolof. Although living in an area predominantly inhabited by Muslims, the majority of the Diola are Catholics. They are concentrated in the delta of the Casamance river around the towns of Bignona and Ziguinchor. The Aku make up about 1,8 % of the population and they are mostly Christians. The Gambia is a secular country, where freedom of religion is protected by the Constitution and a high level of tolerance is shown to people of other faiths.

Languages

English is the official language in Gambia spoken in schools and by administration and understood by about 70% of the population. Apart from English, there are 20 distinct languages spoken. The principal nine vernaculars in Gambia include the Mandinka, the language of the country's largest ethnic group, belonging to the Manding branch of Mandé which also includes the Bambara and Soninké languages. About 25 % of the population speaks Mandinka. The Wolof, widely spoken in the coastal region around Banjul, represents the Gambia's lingua franca. The Fula speak Pulaar, a language closely related to Wolof. Other languages include Jola-Fonyi and Serer-Sine belonging to the Atlantic branch of the Niger-Congo language family, Mandjak and Krio, the Aku's Creole. A large number of Gambians are multi-lingual, speaking several local languages as well as English,

Plant Life and Wildlife

Plant Life

About 530 species of plants have been recorded in The Gambia.

Gambia lies within the tropical zone between the Sahel in the north and the tropical forest zone in the south. About 45 % of the country's territory is covered by forest or wooded savanna and 30 % by bush savanna, partly used for agriculture. 42 nature reserves and conservation areas have been established to protect the forests. The wooded savanna can be divided into two categories: savanna on deeper and more fertile soils in areas of high rainfall in the west of the country and savanna on shallow soils in areas where less precipitation occurs in the east.

Among the large trees that cover Gambia's rainforests there are mahogany (*Khaya senegalensis*), iroko (*Chlorophora excelsa* or *Milicia excelsa*), various species of ficus and the silk cotton tree with its impressive buttress-roots (*Ceiba pentandra*).

Other trees that are commonly found are the African palisander (*Pterocarpus erinaceus*), one of the favoured woods for construction timber and musical instruments, and also used to make traditional medicine. Milne-Redhead (*Cordyla pinnata*), a typical tree of the savanna in the eastern part of the country, African mesquite (*Prosopis africana*), whose seeds are dried and used as food condiments and *Azelia africana*, also known as lenke, mostly used to manufacture parquet floors and djembe drums and to produce condiments made of its flowers. The red silk cotton tree (*Bombax ceiba*), native to tropical Asia, is also commonly found in the Gambia. In December and January it is in full bloom and presents a striking blaze of crimson. One of the most common trees in open country is the Néré or locust bean tree (*Parkia biglobosa*). The kernels of Néré are fermented to make "kende" also known as "soumbala", a popular condiment used in West African cuisine.

The typical savanna landscape is characterized by scattered baobab (*Adansonia digitata*), mango (*Mangifera indica*) and shea-butter trees (*Vitellaria paradoxa*). Various species of acacia are also common.

The coastal area was once covered by forest which was cleared for the construction of tourist hotels. Only a small area of the typical coastal forest has been preserved in Bijilo Forest Park which is a nature reserve established to protect the existing vegetation. In the brackish water zone that borders the River Gambia, extending 200km inland, dense mangrove forests grow abundantly.

The most important commercial crops in Gambia are millet, rice, cotton and groundnuts as well as oil palms. The oil palm is native to Guinea and is one of the most economically important species of palms. Leafs and branches are used to thatch roofs, red palm oil is extracted from the pulp of the fruit and white oil from the kernel. They are both used in the food industry. Palm wine is very popular among the population. Coconut palms grown in the country produce nutritious fruits and they are used for cooking but also in soaps, pharmaceutical products and cosmetics.

Wildlife

There are seven national parks in The Gambia, however, they are less important than those in Senegal; Kiang West National Park, Baobolong Wetland Reserve, Niimi National Park, Abuko Nature Reserve, Tanji Bird Reserve, Bijilo Forest Park and River Gambia National Park. A total of 108 mammal species occur in the Gambia. The largest natural protected area is Kiang West National Park covering a territory of about 19,000 hectares. The mammals found in the park include the rare sitatunga antelope, bushbuck and duiker. It is said that there are a few leopards living in the area. The park is also home to warthog, mongoose and hyena. West African manatees are sometimes observed in the river. Primates living in the park include colobus monkeys and baboons. The River Gambia National Park is site of a chimpanzee-reintroduction project.

The Gambia is a country with great birding potential: 592 species have been recorded, 12 of them officially classified as endangered. About one third are migratory birds. The Tanji Bird Reserve or the areas along the river and its tributaries, called bolongs, offer excellent opportunities for bird watching. Species which are commonly found include various species of herons and egrets, for example goliath and squacco heron, cattle and great egret, cormorants, African darters, great white pelicans, some species of kingfisher including pied kingfisher and malachite kingfisher, bee-eaters for example blue-cheeked bee-eater, lapwings including wattled and spur-winged lapwing, black-winged stilt, African jacana and many other species.

Gambia's Atlantic coast is rich in fish including barracuda, sting-ray, snapper, tiger fish, shark species and tuna, as well as shellfish crustaceans and molluscs including lobster, crawfish, cuttlefish, mussels and marine gastropods. Dolphins can be viewed in the estuary. Among the fish types occurring in the river there are tilapia, catfish and many more species.

Geography

The Gambia is the smallest country on mainland Africa, with a total area of 11,295 km². It is surrounded by Senegal, except for a short coastline. It is a strip of land about 480 km long and 10 to 50 kilometres wide. The country follows the path of the Gambia River. The border it shares with Senegal is 740 km long. Its coastline extends for 80 km along the Atlantic Ocean. It is a flat, low-lying country reaching its highest point of 53 m in the eastern area. The Gambia River is the country's lifeline. – a major river in Africa, running about 1,120 kilometres from the Fouta Djallon Highlands in Guinea, near the town of Labé, not far from the sources of the Senegal and the Niger rivers, to Banjul. Before it flows into the sea the river broadens into a wide estuary of about 22 km. Its largest tributary is Bintang Bolong. Gambia can be divided into three geographical zones: The Gambia River is the country's dominant geographical feature with a very flat mangrove belt along the banks, a flat plain formed by sandy hills alternating with broad valleys in the west, and a sandstone plateau in the east.

Economy

The Gambia has no important mineral or other natural resources. Agriculture, tourism and fishing represent the main sources of income. Groundnuts, cashew nuts, fish and cotton make an important contribution to exports. Groundnut is by far the country's leading cash crop. Peanut production accounts for almost 50 percent of cultivated land and makes up more than 70 % of The Gambia's export earnings. Other major crops are rice, maize, millet, sorghum and cassava. In the eastern part of the country cotton is grown, while the palm oil industry is concentrated in the coastal areas, but their export plays only a subordinate role. Hides and skins are also exported. Agriculture remains the most important sector, employing more than two-third of the Gambian workforce and making up about 30 percent of gross domestic product.

The second most important source of income is tourism, particularly beach travel.

The Gambia is a country with almost no industry apart from a few plants processing groundnuts. There is also a brewery, bakeries, bicycle production and a foundry, as well as a pharmaceutical company. A large number of small businesses produce furniture, and wood carvings, some of them are metal and fish processing factories.