Savannah Stories

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Introduction

Stretching wide beneath Ghana’s northern sky, the savannah unfolds as a rich and enigmatic realm—a landscape shaped by ancient winds, where baobabs stand sentinel amid vast grasslands and the White and Black Volta Rivers carve life-giving corridors through parched earth. This is Northern Ghana: a region less traversed by tourists, yet crucial to the heartbeat of the nation. Here, spiritual and geographical frontiers meet, histories intertwine, and a vibrant tapestry of cultures, flavors, and stories thrive.

To journey into the savannah is to embark on a voyage through time and tradition. The region has long been a crossroads—between rainforest and Sahel, between the kingdoms of old and the aspirations of today. It has fostered enduring chieftaincies like those of the Gonja, Dagomba, and Mamprusi, and has served as a junction for trans-Saharan trade routes and spiritual migrations. Layered atop its soils are the memories of traders, farmers, warriors, and pilgrims who have left their mark through language, food, music, and faith.

Northern Ghana is doubly distinct: set apart by its climate, landscapes, and ethnic medley, yet undeniably woven into the fabric of Ghanaian identity. Its people—Dagomba, Frafra, Gonja, Mamprusi, and over a dozen more—speak diverse tongues and hold vibrant festivals, yet share common threads of resilience, hospitality, and reverence for tradition. Here, Islam blends with indigenous spirituality, drumming fills the air during Damba, and elders recite histories by firelight, passing wisdom to a new generation.

But it is the savannah’s cuisine that perhaps most sweetly binds its people. On market days, the scent of tuo zaafi, smoked guinea fowl, and rich groundnut stews drifts through the air, mingling with laughter, bargaining, and the rhythmic clang of blacksmiths’ tools. Women stir shea butter and fry yam sticks while children dart between stalls of mangoes and millet. Foodways here are shaped by the surging seasonality of rain and drought, by ingenious adaptation, and by a collective spirit that sees neighbors welcomed to every feast.

This book, Savannah Stories, is an invitation into the heart of this landscape—a journey through kitchens, farms, festivals, and memory. It blends the immediacy of travel with the patient observation of history, offering portraits of home cooks and changemakers, weavers and healers, rice farmers, and storytellers. From the elephant paths of Mole National Park to the ancient walls of Larabanga Mosque, from the hush of the pre-dawn fields to the jubilant crescendo of festival days, we will explore the many layers that make the savannah so compelling.

More than a simple chronicle, this work seeks to honor the complexity—and the joy—of Northern Ghana. It is at once a culinary adventure and a meditation on identity, resilience, and renewal. Through these pages, you will taste, hear, and see the vibrant heartland of Ghana—a place, like all true homes, that is both old and ever-changing. Welcome to the savannah.

CHAPTER ONE: Peoples of the Savannah: Dagomba, Mamprusi, Frafra, and Beyond

The northern savannah of Ghana is a vibrant mosaic of peoples, each with their distinct traditions, languages, and histories, yet all bound by the expansive landscape they call home. While the Gonja language is widely spoken, the region is a melting pot of diverse ethnic groups, numbering over nineteen in total. Among the most prominent are the Dagomba, Mamprusi, and Frafra, whose intricate cultures form the backbone of the region's character. Understanding their stories is key to truly experiencing the heartland of Ghana.

The Dagomba, concentrated primarily in what was formerly Ghana's Northern Region, have a rich and detailed oral tradition, meticulously preserved through generations by professional griots known as Lunsi, who are often drummers. Their political history, according to these oral accounts, traces back to a legendary figure known as Tohazie, meaning "red hunter." The Dagomba's social structure is notably hierarchical, with the paramount king, the Yaa Naa, at its apex, overseeing a tiered system of chiefs. Unlike other monarchical systems, Dagomba chiefs are said to be "skinned" rather than enthroned, as their traditional seat is a stack of animal skins. Islam arrived in the region between the 12th and 15th centuries through Soninke traders, known as Wangara, and has since been the state religion, although traditional beliefs still hold significant sway and are interwoven with Islamic practices.

The Mamprusi people, closely related to the Dagomba, are found predominantly in the North East Region of Ghana, particularly in areas like Nalerigu and Gambaga, and also extend into parts of the Upper East and Upper West Regions, as well as into Togo and Burkina Faso. Their ancient kingdom of Mamprugu is considered one of the oldest in the territory that would become Ghana, founded around the 13th century by Naa Gbanwah/Gbewah at Pusiga, which the Mamprusi revere as their ancestral home. The Mamprusi hold a position of seniority among the Mole-Dagomba ethnic group, which includes the Dagomba, Nanumba, and Mossi, a relationship often expressed through symbolic acts like the enskinment of the Mossi King by the Nayiri, the Mamprusi King. Like the Dagomba, the Mamprusi are predominantly Muslim, a faith that gained prominence through the influence of Dyula merchants starting in the 17th century, though traditional religious practices remain.

The Frafra, also known as Gurune or Farefare, primarily inhabit the Upper East Region of Ghana, bordering southern Burkina Faso, from where they are believed to have migrated. Their name, "Frafra," is said to have originated from a colonial-era greeting, "Ya Fare fare?", meaning "How is your suffering (work)?", used by Christian

missionaries when encountering Frafra farmers. This term, though initially a colonial designation, was eventually adopted by the people themselves. Unlike the centralized chieftaincy systems of the Dagomba and Mamprusi, Frafra societies are traditionally comprised of farmers and operate without a formal system of chiefs. Important decisions are historically made by a council of elders, and religious leaders often hold political authority, particularly in matters concerning the agricultural cycle and land allocation. The Frafra are renowned for their vibrant artistic crafts, including straw baskets, hats, and feather products, which are sold across Ghana.

Beyond these prominent groups, the Savannah Region is also home to the Gonja, who are the dominant ethnic group in the region and whose language is widely spoken. The Gonja trace their origins to the Mande Ngbanya clan, who migrated south from the Mali Empire around 1600 after the fall of the Songhai Empire, establishing their capital at Yagbum. Their history is well-documented by Arab Muslims and Islamic scholars who accompanied them. The Gonja Kingdom was founded in 1675 by Sumaila Ndewura Jakpa, a legendary warrior. The Gonja, like many in the savannah, have a strong Islamic presence, though traditional beliefs and practices are also integral to their culture.

Other ethnic groups, such as the Vagla, Brifos, Tampulmas, and Mo, also contribute to the rich cultural tapestry of the Savannah Region, each bringing their unique customs and dialects. This diverse co-existence has shaped a region where different identities intertwine, creating a vibrant social landscape. The histories of these groups are often intertwined with trade routes that crisscrossed the savannah, connecting communities and facilitating the exchange of goods, ideas, and beliefs. The influence of trans-Saharan trade routes and the gradual spread of Islam are particularly evident in the region's historical narratives.

Identity in the savannah is deeply rooted in these ancestral connections and shared experiences. Oral traditions, passed down through generations, serve as living archives, preserving the exploits of ancestral heroes, the wisdom of proverbs, and the intricate details of kingdom building. These stories are not merely historical accounts but actively shape present-day understanding of self and community. The shared landscape, with its cycles of dry and wet seasons, also plays a unifying role, influencing agricultural practices, daily rhythms, and the timing of various festivals.

Religion, whether Islam or traditional African beliefs, is a fundamental aspect of identity in Northern Ghana. While Islam is the majority religion in many areas, the practice often incorporates elements of traditional African religion, including the reverence for ancestral spirits and nature deities. This syncretic approach reflects a deep spiritual connection to the land and to those who came before. Shrines, sometimes unassuming, are scattered throughout the landscape, serving as places of worship and reflection. Traditional healers, with their knowledge of medicinal plants and spiritual rituals, remain vital figures in many communities, offering guidance and

promoting well-being.

The languages spoken across the savannah, though varied, belong largely to the Oti-Volta subfamily of the Niger-Congo language family. This linguistic interconnectedness reflects ancient migrations and ongoing interactions between communities. While English serves as the official language of Ghana, the local languages are the true conduits of cultural expression, carrying the nuances of storytelling, song, and everyday conversation. Learning a few phrases in Dagbani, Mampruli, or Gonja can open doors to deeper connections with the local people and a richer understanding of their world.

The character of the region is further defined by the centrality of chieftaincy, particularly among the Dagomba, Mamprusi, and Gonja. These traditional systems of governance, with their elaborate hierarchies and protocols, are not just administrative structures but also vital custodians of cultural heritage. Chiefs play a crucial role in mediating disputes, preserving customs, and leading community celebrations. Their authority is often intertwined with spiritual responsibilities, underscoring the holistic nature of leadership in the savannah.

Storytelling, often accompanied by music, is a cherished tradition across all ethnic groups. Evenings in rural communities are often filled with the rhythmic sounds of drums and the captivating narratives of elders, who recount historical events, moral fables, and personal anecdotes. These gatherings are not just for entertainment but serve as powerful educational platforms, transmitting knowledge, values, and a sense of shared identity to younger generations. The stories speak of resilience, ingenuity, and the enduring connection between people and their land.

Music and dance are inextricably linked to daily life and celebration. From the intricate drumming of the Dagomba that tells stories of historical events and origins, to the spirited communal dances during festivals, these art forms are a vital expression of cultural identity. Each ethnic group possesses unique musical styles and dance forms, often tied to specific ceremonies, historical narratives, or social functions. The Kpana dance of the Vagla hunters, celebrating a successful hunt, and the Zongor dance of widows, symbolizing resilience, are just two examples of the expressive power of movement in the savannah.

The vibrant smock clothing, or *fugu*, is a visual hallmark of the Savannah Region, a handwoven fabric with distinctive patterns that represents the artistic heritage of its people. Beyond clothing, crafts like leatherwork and pottery also showcase the skill and creativity of local artisans. These crafts are not just decorative but often hold practical and cultural significance, used in daily life, during ceremonies, or as symbols of status and identity. The intricate designs and vibrant colors of these creations tell stories of their own, reflecting the region's rich artistic legacy.

Ultimately, the peoples of the Northern Ghanaian savannah, with their diverse histories, languages, and traditions, collectively weave a vibrant and compelling narrative. They are a testament to the enduring power of culture, the resilience of communities, and the deep connection between people and their land. Exploring their individual stories allows for a fuller appreciation of the profound richness that defines this captivating region of West Africa.

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