

research snapshot

summarize | mobilize



Ghanaian Immigrants Use Religion to Affirm Their Identity

What is this research about?

In recent years, the influence of religion has increased dramatically throughout the world. The flow of capital, the movement of information, and the migration of people have all helped to spread religion across the globe. In the process, religion has helped to ease the process of migration to countries like Canada. A shared religion can offer immigrants a way to connect with one another and celebrate their culture. It can offset the cultural shock, alienation, and discrimination that newcomers often find in their adopted countries. While the majority of the early immigrants to Canada were white Europeans, since the mid-1980s, the immigration of visible minorities, such as Africans, has grown steadily. Yet, despite this growth, there has been a lack of research on the religious practices of African immigrants in Canada. How do these immigrants worship in their adopted country? How do they structure their churches? And how do they use their churches to understand and assist themselves?

What did the researcher do?

With funding from SSHRC, researchers at York University developed the Ghanaian Immigrants' Religious Transnationalism (GIRT) Project, which seeks to understand the religious practices of Ghanaians in Toronto. Using surveys and interviews, the researchers set out to answer a number of questions about Ghanaian churches, including:

- How are they founded?
- How do they organize themselves?

What you need to know:

Ghanaian immigrants in Toronto use their churches not only for spiritual support, but also to form social networks and affirm their cultural identity. Racism causes some immigrants to turn to religion – which, in turn, can create ethnic enclaves that further isolate immigrants from other Canadians.

- What kinds of social services do they provide
- What effect do they have on the lives of Ghanaian immigrants?

While many studies have tried to learn more about the economic activities of newcomers, the GIRT Project is unique, because it focuses on the religious practices of African immigrants who have not received much research attention.

What did the researcher find?

The GIRT Project identified 37 Ghanaian immigrant churches in Toronto and examined the following four in detail:

- The Church of Pentecost Canada Inc.
- All Nations Full Gospel Church
- The Ghana Methodist Church of Toronto
- The Ghanaian Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) Church of Toronto

The researchers found that although Ghanaians have been in Toronto since the 1960s, they did not have enough people to form their own churches until the 1980s. Like any not-for-profit organization in Canada, their churches, led by well-educated people, have formal constitutions. Furthermore, the research noted that the churches were not founded for 'reverse' missionary work; they were founded so that Ghanaians could have a space to worship and affirm their ethnicity, and to help Ghanaian immigrants in the city – insulating them from racism, alienation, and cultural insensitivity. The churches even mobilize resources to help Ghanaians back home with economic development. They currently provide a range of social services including: English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, marriage counseling, financial and legal assistance, conflict resolution, mentoring, and sports and summer school programs for youth. All of the congregations that were studied have programs aimed specifically at youth, a demographic group that can be difficult to engage.

Interestingly, most of the Ghanaian immigrant churches have more women than men (a ratio of 60:40). And, while women are not completely excluded from leadership roles, they often fill low-level positions that involve looking after little children, cooking, and cleaning. Still, traditional gender roles in Ghanaian churches are gradually changing. The churches are flexible in other ways: they have re-organized their schedules to accommodate the Canadian work week, and they also rely on the 'cell' system, in which small groups of church members meet in private homes for bible studies. Languages other than English – including Twi, Ga, and Ewe – are frequently used. Churchgoers tend to dress up, drawing on stylish attire from both Western and African cultures. The upbeat sermons invite interaction.

Even though Ghanaian churches help newcomers to adapt to life in Toronto, they seem to promote the creation of ethnic enclaves, which can prevent immigrants from integrating into the broader Canadian society. But Ghanaians would probably not need to assert their cultural identity through their churches if they were accepted as mainstream Canadians.

How can you use this research?

Given that the number of immigrants in Canada will only continue to grow, policymakers need to show more interest in immigrant churches – arguably the most dominant, well-run, and stable institutions in many immigrant communities. Future research should explore how immigrant churches in Toronto work with other churches and governments – in Canada and overseas.

About the Researcher

Professor Joseph Mensah teaches at the Atkinson School of Social Sciences and serves as the Coordinator for International Development Studies at York University. For more information on the GIRT Project, go to: www.yorku.ca/girt. A GIRT Symposium was held at York on October 24, 2008.

jmensah@yorku.ca

Citation

Mensah, J. (2009). 'Doing religion' overseas: The characteristics and functions of Ghanaian immigrant churches in Toronto, Canada. *Societies Without Borders*, 4(1), 21-44. Available online at <http://bit.ly/1fLCVVX>

Keywords

Immigration, Religion, Churches, Social development, Urban geography

Knowledge Mobilization at York

York's Knowledge Mobilization Unit provides services for faculty, graduate students, community and government seeking to maximize the impact of academic research and expertise on public policy, social programming, and professional practice. This summary has been supported by the Office of the Vice-President Research and Innovation at York and project funding from SSHRC and CIHR.

kmbunit@yorku.ca

www.researchimpact.ca

