

Trends in Religious Affiliation Among the Kassena-Nankana of Northern Ghana: Are Switching Patterns Identical by Gender?

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

The practice and rites of traditional religion among the Kassena-Nankana people of northern Ghana are common and extremely significant. Every village has soothsayers who guide ancestral worship and every compound has a shrine for making sacrifices to ancestral spirits (Adongo, Phillips, and Binka 1998). Christianity among the Kassena-Nankana is gaining prominence whereas Islam is also finding its way to the people. However, traditional religion has been practiced for a long time among the Kassena-Nankana compared with Christianity and Islam. In this paper, we examine trends in religious affiliation in Kassena-Nankana District (KND) of northern Ghana between 1995 and 2003. Particularly, we seek to find out the extent to which women and men are switching their religions. Our hypothesis is that there are more people switching from traditional religion to Christianity than is the reverse or to Islam. Research on religious trends in KND is much needed and useful in understanding the factors that are influencing social and demographic changes in KND. For example, recent demographic trends show that fertility is declining and contraceptive use is increasing (Debuur et al. 2002).

Of late, there has been a growing significance of studies dealing with religion in the life of contemporary Africans. This growth has been motivated in part by the advent of Christianity and specifically the rebirth of Pentecostal and charismatic churches in Africa during the recent past. Ghana is one of the countries in sub Saharan Africa that has experienced the growth in Christianity in two phases. The first, being a result of the arrival of the Portuguese missionaries in 1471 near Sekondi (now Sekondi-Takoradi) in the coastal part of Ghana. Before the Portuguese explorers and traders left, they put up a large wooden cross on the beach, the first cross ever to stand on the West African soil. The Portuguese came back in 1482 and landed in Elmina (also in southern coast of Ghana) and offered the first sacrifice of Mass ever to be celebrated in Ghana by the chaplain accompanying them (Kzaresam 1975). Although there was no serious evangelization between the 15th and 19th century, Christian influence gradually made its way to the local people. During this period colonialists were more interested in trade mostly in gold and slaves than evangelization. Until 1874, when the British took control of Ghana (then Gold Coast), there was little room for evangelization because of continuous clashes between European colonialists such as the Portuguese, Dutch, and the Danish. When the British claimed full responsibility for Ghana and thereby unifying the various ethnic groups within the country, it was then possible for serious missionary work to start (Kzaresam 1975).

And secondly, the growth in Christianity was intensified by the second missionary evangelization period in Ghana which started at the end of the 19th century. This period also saw the arrival of both Catholic and Protestant missionaries who since then have played a leading role in the history of Christianity as well as in the development of education. It was during the second phase that Catholic missionary work resumed in Ghana in 1880 with Elmina as a base. Since then it made a steady and uninterrupted growth. In particular, the Catholic missionaries who first arrived on 23 April 1906 in Navrongo, the capital of KND, came as a result of a strong wave of anti-clericalism that hit France and

spread out of the then French Empire thus affecting missionary work. Converting people to Christianity was hard in Navrongo because people were reluctant to meet the “strange” men. The few who were eager to listen to the word of God retreated as soon as they learnt that being a Christian meant giving up all their wives. The demands of being a Christian were too difficult. Many people lost their interest but the missionaries never gave up (Kazaresam 1975).

The Catholic missionaries—the agents of social change in KND—instituted two necessary means of evangelization of the time: schools and medical centres. The schools served as nurseries for change in which the youth learned the Christian religion and gradually learnt science, politics, technology, etc. This approach to education detached the youth from traditional beliefs. As for the medical centres, most people who came to the missionaries did so more out of medical aid than the religious attraction (Kazaresam 1975).

The advent of Christianity led to the rebirth of Pentecostal and charismatic churches in the last few decades. In particular, membership in charismatic churches is common among young, educated, and upwardly mobile people in the urban areas (De Witte 2003). Even in rural areas, however, women and youth are particularly moved by this social change. The growth of Pentecostal and charismatic churches in Africa has been propelled by the way the religions addressed the conditions of modernity in the postcolonial societies (Gifford 1994). African Pentecostal and charismatic churches offer a breakthrough for salvation, divine healing, deliverance, and prosperity. For example, membership in Pentecostal churches is believed to yield a personal experience of the acts of the Holy Spirit of which speaking in tongues is the first outward manifestation. The Bible is viewed as the foundation of the Christian faith and the ultimate elimination of traditional beliefs. Believers draw upon a “born-again” ideology and specific practices of creating the born-again Christian.

Ghana’s population was estimated at 20 million in 2000 of which 69% were Christians, 16% Muslim, and 9% adhering to traditional or indigenous and other religions (United States State Department 2002). Since the 1980s, an increasing number of Ghanaians view themselves as Christians. La Verle (1994) reported that the percentage of Ghanaians claiming to be Christians rose sharply from 42% prior to the 1980s to 62% in the mid-1980s. Gallup International (2000) reported that out of 50,000 people in 60 countries, the majority (98%) of Ghanaians interviewed professed belonging to a religious denomination with 82% reporting regular church attendance.

Recent literature (e.g., Yirenkyi 2000) documents that not only are Ghanaians becoming more religious but the more faith healing organizations, charismatic, evangelical, as well as Pentecostal churches have emerged. These novel churches are popular because of their “healing,” “salvation,” and “prosperity” approach—something which seems to fit the needs of many impoverished populations dissatisfied with their current living standards.

De Witte (2003) has pointed out that the upsurge of these charismatic churches may be associated with the fact that religion has emerged as a potent social force in private and public life. It is reasonable to think that such an increase in the proportion of people professing religious affiliation should be associated with their knowledge of issues that have a direct impact on their life such as AIDS, infectious diseases, and also knowledge of their reproductive behavior.

What are the trends in religious affiliation between 1995 and 2003? Have more individuals switched from one religious group to another? What are the characteristics of individuals who switch religions? Longitudinal surveys allow one to assess the degree to which individuals switch religions. This paper uses unique data sets, collected by the Navrongo Health Research Centre, containing linked records across two surveys conducted in KND in 1995, 1999, and 2003 by comparing religious affiliation in 2003 against prior religious affiliation and show which switching stream is dominant. For women, we examine the extent to which they switch religions in two parts: first, we follow a cohort that was interviewed both in 1995 and 2003 and second, follow another cohort that was interviewed both in 1999 and 2003. For men, we examine a cohort that was interviewed both in 1999 and 2003. This approach will enable us to determine if (a) there is variation in switching across all religions; (b) if switching patterns are consistent (or not) for women between 1995 and 2003, and also between 1999 and 2003; and (c) if the switching patterns for women and men are similar between 1999 and 2003.

The present study is a component of a more broad general investigation of social and demographic change in KND. The major limitation of this study is that individuals may switch religions several times between the eight-year period. However, we assume that such rates of multiple switching may be negligible to bias the results considering that switching religions may be a long process in most cases. In addition, our data have no information on the different Christian denominations (e.g., Catholic, Protestant, Pentecostal or charismatic). However, we know from the literature reviewed earlier on Catholic missionaries that majority of Christians in the district are Catholics and a sizeable proportion are Protestants. Thus, we only examine three broad religions: Christians, Traditionalists, and Islam. We exclude individuals professing “other” religion in the panel surveys because the numbers were very small.

Research Setting

The KND in the Upper East Region of Ghana, borders Burkina Faso, and has a population of about 143,000. Two main seasons exist: a short wet season with an average annual rainfall of 950mm to 1,100mm from June to August, and a dry season from October to May when little or no rainfall occurs in the district. The people are comprised mainly of the Kassena, Nankana, and Buli speaking people with homogeneous socio-cultural lifestyles. Literacy rates are generally low and the population is primarily rural, agrarian, and living in dispersed settlements. Subsistence farming is the backbone of the economy. The KND is a site of the Tono dam, where dry season farming is promoted to reduce migration of young men and women to the southern parts of the country. The main crops grown are millet, groundnuts, beans, maize, and rice. The KND is also the leading producer of tomatoes in Ghana. Livestock rearing includes fowls, goats, sheep, and cattle. Poverty is also rampant (Akazili et al. 2003).

Methods

Because the questions on religious affiliation in the panel survey are repeated every year, religious affiliation as reported in the baseline surveys (1995 and 1999 for women; and 1999 for men) can be compared with religious affiliation in 2003. Although the panel surveys are conducted annually, we examine the 1995, 1999, and 2003 panels in order to assess the changes in religious affiliation over a reasonable long period of time. This is important because we observe a cohort of individuals in the baseline surveys and follow them in 2003. The samples are in three categories: (1) women aged 15–41 years in 1995 who move into the age group 23–49 in 2003; (2) women aged 15–45 years in 1999 who move into the age group 19–49 in 2003; and (3) men aged 20–65 in 1999 who move into age group 24–69 in 2003. Observing individuals in annual surveys, for the purposes of this study, has got the disadvantage of censoring. We want to follow individuals for a period we think is substantial to influence changes in religion.

For women in 1995–2003 group, the baseline survey yielded a sample of 5,288 women aged 15–49 years and 5,842 women were interviewed in 2003. The 2003 sample is greater than the 1995 sample because urban Navrongo which was not part of the 1995 sample was included beginning from the 1996 round. However, our sample for the present study is restricted to 3,911 currently married and ever-married women of reproductive age (i.e., 15–41 years) from the 1995 survey of whom we are most confident that linkages for only 2,033 women in 2003 have been done correctly—about 38% of the original sample. In the 1999–2003 group, 6,162 women (15–49 years) were interviewed in 1999 and the 2003 survey interviewed 5,842 women (15–49 years). Out of the 1999 sample aged 15–45 years (n=5,002), we are able to link 2,424 women in 2003 (aged 19–49 years) representing 48% of the 1999 sample. A total of 2,534 men aged between 10 and 95 years were interviewed in 1999. In 2003, a total of 2,237 men were interviewed with ages ranging from 19 to 92 years. We link a total of 1,450 men aged 24–69 years in 2003 out of 2,259 men aged 20–65 years in 1999. This linkage represents 64% of the original sample.

Preliminary Results

Demographic characteristics

A comparison of basic characteristics of women interviewed in 1995 with those interviewed both in 1995 and 2003 show that 61% in 1995 practiced traditional religion whereas in 2003 only 36% did so. About 75% were married/living together in all the survey years but the never married women declined from 14% in 1995 to 6% in 2003. This may be related to the aging of the cohort. Sixty-nine percent were uneducated in 1995 whereas this declined to 61% in 2003. Further, 38% in 2003 had at least primary education. Kassena and Nankana are dominant ethnic groups. The prevalence of polygyny declined from 45% in 1995 to 36% in 2003 and on average women were older (36 years) in 2003 than in 1995 (32 years). Again, women had more children ever born on average in 2003 (at 3.8) compared with 1995 (at 3.5).

For women interviewed in 1999, 41% were traditionalists and 52% Christians. A similar pattern is observed for women interviewed both in 1999 and 2003 though the percentages are high for Christians (57%) and low for traditionalists (33%) compared with all women in 1999. The 1999 sample is different from the 1995 sample in that the former has more never married women than the latter (23% vs 14%), few illiterate women (56% vs 69%), few women in polygamous unions (40% vs 45%), younger women (29 years vs 32 years), and have few births (2.9 vs 3.5).

On average, 62% of men were traditionalists between 1999 and 2003 which is similar to the percentage of women in 1995 and about 20 percentage points higher than women interviewed in 1999. In general, the characteristics of men and women between 1999 and 2003 are fairly the same with the exception of men, as expected, being older on average (42 years) than women (29 years), having fathered an average of six children—double than the women, and few being in polygamous unions (26%) than women (33%).

Switching of religions

The general trend in religious affiliation annually between 1995 and 2003 shows a decline in the percentage of traditionalists. However, the decline is more among women than men. Christianity is on the increase with proportions of individuals practicing Islam being fairly stable. Turning to the percent of women (1995–2003) switching religions by the major religions shows that among Christians, 52% did not switch to other religions whereas 38% switched to traditional religion and 9% switched to Islam. Among traditionalists, 34% did not switch, 53% became Christians, and 13% became Muslims. Among the Muslims, 11% did not switch whereas 42% and 48% switched to Christianity and traditional religions. These results demonstrate that within each religious group, the highest switching rates are observed among Muslims followed by traditionalists and Christians in that order. We pool women from all the religious groups to identify which switching patterns emerge. The highest percentage of switchers is observed among traditionalists (to Christianity) at 31% followed by Christians (to traditional) at 14% and traditionalists (to Islam) at 8%. Other smaller percentages of switchers are observed among Christians (to Islam) at 3% and roughly similar percentages for Muslims switching to traditional and Christianity. In brief, two patterns seem to evolve among traditionalists and Christians: the former are switching to Christianity more than the latter moving to the former.

For women interviewed between 1999 and 2003, the switching patterns are not very different from those interviewed between 1995 and 2003 though the proportions within religious groups are slightly higher for women in 1999–2003 than for those in 1995–2003. For example, 59% of Christians never switched compared with 52% in 1995–2003. Similarly, 37% of traditionalists did not switch in 1999–2003 compared with 34% in 1995–2003. In general, while 61% of women in 1995–2003 switched religions, only 54% did so in 1999–2003 and the dominant stream remains the same: from traditional to Christianity.

The results for men by religious groups differ from those of women. Among Christians, 61% became traditionalists whereas 59% of traditionalists did not switch. Majority (63%) of Muslims also became traditionalists. Generally, if men are Christians or Muslims, they either switch to traditional religion or if they are traditionalists they do not switch to any religion. When we pool switchers and non-switchers together, 48% of men did not switch religions whereas 52% did so. And of those who switched religions, 22% converted from traditional to Christianity whereas 18% of Christians became traditionalists.

Difference between switchers and non-switchers

An interesting issue to examine is to find out whether there are any significant differences between switchers and non-switchers. Simple logit regressions show that significant differences in switching exist by education and ethnicity across all individuals. Education and ethnicity are considered as fixed over the period of interest. For women in 1995–2003, those who have some schooling are 41% more likely to switch religions than the illiterate. The Nankanas who have low levels of schooling are 25% less likely to switch religions than the Kassenas who apparently have higher proportions of women with some schooling. The “other” ethnic groups are about eight times more likely to switch religions than the Kassenas. For women in 1999–2003, those who have some schooling are 17% more likely to switch religion but the odds are not highly significant ($p=0.053$) whereas significance is observed for women in “other” ethnic groups who are about 77% more likely to switch religions. Results for men are consistent with those of women in 1995–2003. Men with some schooling are 90% more likely to switch religions than those who are illiterate. Nankana men are about 48% less likely to switch religions than Kassena men whereas the “other” ethnic groups are about nine times more likely to switch religions than the Kassenas.

Conclusions

A number of findings are emerging from this study. To a large extent, women who practice traditional religion are more likely to switch to Christianity than to Islam. In addition, we have found that ethnicity and education play a vital role in changing trends of religious affiliation. The Kassenas who are mostly educated are more likely to embrace changes in their religious affiliation than the Nankanas who are less educated. The reason could be that Christianity (along with education) was first introduced among the Kassenas because the early missionaries had few problems with their language (Kassem). These two factors could have significantly impacted the Kassenas to effect the progressive social changes in their lives. The switching pattern for women and men between 1999 and 2003 may suggest that women are more likely to change their religion than men partly because the latter are the custodians of the tradition and they must preserve what has been handed to them by their ancestors.

In addition, the overall impression to be gained from this analysis is that, the traditional role of patriarchy is diminishing, and a rapid transition in the shift from traditional religion is a major component of the erosion of traditional social institutions. We are not sure, however, that the shift in religion is a symptom of this transition or a cause of it. But, the fact that religious preferences are changing among women but not men may be of profound social consequences for the status of women. Traditional religion is practiced for women by men, and all rites reinforce the institution of patriarchy and the traditional dominance of men. The fact that women are declaring their religion to be Christianity or Islam may signal a trend toward greater autonomy in the family and new aspirations, values, and behaviour. We hope that this study will increase our understanding of trends in religious affiliation particularly in an area where social and demographic changes are comparatively modest.

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