

**MISSION TO NORTHERN MIGRANTS IN SOUTHERN GHANA:  
THE CASE OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF GHANA TO THE BULSA PEOPLE**  
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**ABSTRACT**

History in its broadest sense is a record of human's migrations from one environment to another. Migration is a phenomenon all over the world as people move from one place to another in search of a better settlement. There are various reasons why people migrate which include adventure, employment, and escape from family among others. Some flee from political asylum and from war or conflicts in their area which leads them to be refugees. Northern Ghana has experienced an influx of its people moving from the North to southern Ghana. In their migration to the South of Ghana, the Church did not realise the huge number of northern people in their midst whom mission work has to be extended to. It was not until the 1980s when the Ghana Evangelism Committee came out with a survey report indicating the number of northern people in southern Ghana. We are studying the Balsa because they embraced the Presbyterian Church of Ghana missionary work to the Northern people dubbed, Northern Outreach Programme (NOP). The social-religious life of the Balsa people is discussed to know their religious background. The trend of their migration is considered and how they embrace Christianity in the South either as first or second-generation Christians. The study demonstrates how mission could be done among migrants and marginalised people groups in Ghana in particular and the world in general.

**INTRODUCTION**

Northern Ghana is the area in Ghana comprising the three regions of Northern, Upper East and Upper West together with the northern Brong Ahafo and northern Volta.<sup>2</sup> Northern Ghana broadly speaking is that part of Ghana which is north of the Black Volta River and the Volta Lake. There are a few areas in the Volta and Brong Ahafo Regions which are further north than the limits of the Akan language<sup>3</sup>. The north of Ghana is hot and dry, with average daily temperature seldom below 20 degrees and sometimes exceeding 40 degrees. Rainfall is concentrated in a rainy season from mid-April to October, with the peak from June to September. The rest of the year is absolutely rainless.

There is a marked contrast between the humid tropical weather-pattern of the south, with two rainy seasons a year and the single rainy season pattern of the north. This harsh climatic condition in the north forced many to migrate to the south for greener pastures. Inhabitants of northern Ghana are mostly farmers who depend on the weather for their livelihood which is not reliable. In view of this, poverty levels are quite high forcing people to migrate to the southern parts of Ghana or even out of the country. Religiously, Northern Ghana is generally traditional especially in the Upper East and Upper West Regions whilst the Northern Region is mostly Islam. Meanwhile there is Christianity among some ethnic groups such as the

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<sup>2</sup> Northern Ghana now has five regions. North East and Savannah Regions were carved out of the Northern Region with Nalerigu and Damango as the new capitals respectively. Northern Ghana has the five regions as follows: Northern, North East, Savannah, Upper East and Upper West Regions. Northern Volta is now Oti Region with its capital at Dambai. Brong Ahafo now divided into Bono and Ahafo Regions with the capitals at Sunyani and Goaso respectively Daily Graphic, "New Ghana Map with 16 regional capitals", 20<sup>th</sup> February, 2019, 44.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Barker, *Peoples, Languages, and Religions in Northern Ghana*, Accra: Asempa Publishers, 1986, 9

Dagaaba, Balsa and Frafra. Linguistically, there are about thirty-five ethnic groups with their different linguistic as indicated by Peter Barker.

### **Northern migration and the reasons**

Migration of northerners to the south started from the colonial days when northerners were used as labour in the mines and the cocoa growing areas of the south. Some northern people do migrate to the south during the dry season. Some did return home during the rainy season, but the majority did not go back. Some northerners also come to the south primarily to seek employment, to escape persecution, to visit relatives, to learn a trade, to seek education, or simply curiosity. In the south, some northerners trade in livestock whilst others work as labourers, watchmen, garden boys and the women engage in petty trading like selling of groundnut and banana, working as house helps, helpers in local restaurants (chop bars), or engage in extracting of palm kernel oil. These days there are the female potters known as kayayei who come from the north to the south for jobs.<sup>4</sup>

According to the Ghana Evangelism Committee report of 1989, more than 2 million unreached northern and alien people group reside in the seven southern regions of Ghana.<sup>5</sup> This number formed about 18% of the population of Ghana then. In 1993 it increased to 2.3 million according to the same survey.<sup>6</sup> It is obvious that the number keeps increasing each year as climatic, social and economic conditions become worse especially in the north. Northern people who migrate to the cities in the south tend to settle along ethnic lines in the zongos<sup>7</sup> who were mostly neglected by the southern churches. Northern migrants are often assumed to be Muslims whereby some eventually become Muslims in the south. There are those who maintain their traditional religion in the south whilst others convert to Christianity or Islam. The religious life of northern migrates is opened to any religion that contact them in their migration experience. This is what Christians in the south did not know about this “hidden mission field” at their doorstep. There are various reasons that made the southern churches not able to reach out to northern migrates.

Firstly, there is the misconception that all northern people are Muslims and all Muslims are northerners. Most Muslims in the south were from the north thus generalising that every Muslim is from the north and everyone from the north is a Muslim. This misconception made the southerners direct any northerners to the zongo where they can meet their kinsmen. In a place like Nima in Accra, if a Balsa comes there it is likely he/she will be directed to the Imam’s house. Meanwhile not all northern ethnic groups are inclined to Islam. Islam is mostly among the chiefly groups like Dagombas, Wala, Mamprusi, Nanumba and Gonjas. The rest like Dagaaba, Balsa, Frafra, Konkomba are not enthused to Islam. However all these northern people in the south are classified as Muslims whom the southern Christians do not see to be an opportunity to share the gospel with them.

Secondly, social differences made the northern migrants not to attend the southern churches. Language barrier is a strong factor in this way. Those who migrate from the Upper West and East Regions might have been Christians in their hometowns before embarking on their migration to the south. Those who are Presbyterians, Methodist and Pentecostals might have been attending these churches in their hometown where they hear the preaching in their mother-tongue. Back in the south, though they see their church but they do not understand the language being used in the church. They hear the southern languages like Akan, Ga and Fante but do not understand the preaching in these languages thus making them move away from the southern Churches.

Another social factor is the way people dress to church and the calibre of people in the southern churches. Most northern migrates do menial jobs as labourers and helps working for the elite southern men and women. If the boss is attending Presbyterian or Methodist Church, it will be difficult for the labourer

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Atta Ziame, “Christianity in Nima-Mamobi: A case study of Northern Community churches, Unpublished M.Phil. thesis presented to the Department for the Study of Religion, University of Ghana, Legon, 2010

<sup>5</sup> Ghana Evangelism Committee, *National Church Survey: Facing the Unfinished Task of the Church in Ghana*, Accra: Assemblies of God Literature Centre, 1989, 5

<sup>6</sup> Ghana Evangelism Committee, *National Church Survey: Facing the Unfinished Task of the Church in Ghana*, Accra: Assemblies of God Literature Centre, 1993, 5

<sup>7</sup> Hausa word meaning stranger’s quarters. This is the settlement of migrant northerners to the urban towns mostly at the outskirts of the city or town.

to attend the same church with the boss. The way people dress to church also scare them from entering the church. Sundays are special days when people put on their best clothe to church. Meanwhile the northern migrates who work as labourers do not have such clothe to put on every Sunday for their service. This also becomes a barrier for them to worship with their counterparts in the southern churches.

The above reasons might not be deliberate on the part of the southern church at that time, but there should be a conscious effort to let people hear the preaching in their own dialect as on the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came on the disciples (Acts 2:1-13). It is also stated in Revelation 7:9 that, “After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and languages.....” (New International Version). This is an indication that everyone is entitled to the preaching of God’s Word in his/her language. The early missionaries from Basel, Wesleyan, Bremen and the Roman Catholics made an effort to learn the language and to translate the Bible in the various local languages.

The above reasons made the northern migrates to stay in the midst of southern churches yet did not enter any of them. There were some who were watchmen/security personal in the churches and mission houses but never entered the church. Others were employed as labourers to build church buildings but after that no one invited them to the very church they helped in building. Sothern Christians who employed these northern migrates as labourers and house boys and girls did not consider them when they were attending their churches. They kept them at home or work places whilst they attend their churches.

### **A Wake-up call from Ghana Evangelism Committee**

The Ghana Evangelism Committee, a body that advices churches on mission work in Ghana tried to help reach out to northern migrates in southern Ghana. The Ghana Evangelism National Church Survey in 1989 came out with a recommendation on how to reach out to people of northern migrates by establishing churches for them based on mono-ethnic. It came out that in Accra the Methodist Church had found it expedient to have a Ga congregation and a Fanti congregation in the same suburb of Accra. The Presbyterian Church also have both Ga and Twi congregations in Accra. Ghana Evangelism Committee recommended Southern Ghana Christians to begin to recognise the right for northern and alien northern ethno-linguistic groups to retain their cultural identity.<sup>8</sup>

It is a natural practice for dominant societies to exert pressure consciously or unconsciously on minorities to bring them into their line. Consequently, southern churches have expected northern and alien minorities to attend their Church and fall in line as the majority group. To respond to reaching out to northern people, the southern Churches then used various methods of evangelism to bring them to the Church. These methods included crusades and to assimilate them into southern churches. It was those few northerners who were educated in English or those who had stayed in the south for a long time and probably married to southerners or those who were born in the south who could attend the southern churches. The southern churches after neglecting the northern people later on tried to use other ways of reaching out to them by using the above method of assimilation into southern churches.

The Ghana Evangelism Committee’s report suggested ways how to reach out to northern people group in the south. The suggestion was that northern people can be reached by establishing mono-ethnic congregations for them. There are over fifty-four language groups in northern Ghana with completely different dialects. It is therefore impossible to bring all northern people together for a service with the aim to use one common language for them. The mono-ethnic churches will first identify an ethnic group like Frafra, Balsa, or Kasena and establish a church based on their cultural identity. They should be approached through their traditional structure, that is, their tribal or area chief or elders in their association meetings and be encouraged to read their own language through the use of literacy programmes.<sup>9</sup>

The Ghana Evangelism Committee came out with these revealing challenges for the churches. A consultation was organised from 19<sup>th</sup>- 23<sup>rd</sup> June, 1989 at the Calvary Methodist Church, Adabraka, Accra.

<sup>8</sup> Ghana Evangelism Committee, *National Church Survey: Facing the Unfinished Task of the Church in Ghana*, Accra: Assemblies of God Literature Centre, 1989, 120.

<sup>9</sup> Ghana Evangelism Committee, *National Church Survey: Facing the Unfinished Task of the Church in Ghana*, Accra: Assemblies of God Literature Centre, 1989, 120.

At this consultation, the state of the un-reached northerners in the south was brought home forcibly. It was this thought-provoking consultation that challenged the churches including the Presbyterian Church of Ghana to respond to setting up of the Northern Community Churches which they called Northern Outreach Programme (NOP).

### **Northern Outreach Programme of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana (PCG).**

The Presbyterian Church of Ghana (PCG) tried to reach out to Northerners through the Nima Presbyterian Church in the early 1970s. The expatriate lecturers at the then Trinity College, who had Northern cooks yearned to use them to reach out to their northern brethren. One of such lecturers in particular was D.W. Kemller who encouraged his cook, by name Isaac Apaabe a native of Sandema area to go for training at Christian Service College in Kumasi. After the training he was posted to Nima Presbyterian Church as an evangelist to the Northern community especially the Balsa. Before Isaac Apaabe was sent to the Nima Presbyterian Church, there was an earlier attempt by the same church to reach out to some of the northern people within the Nima area.

Colin Paton mentions one Atinga, a garden labourer from Bolgatanga working on the Scottish Mission compound at Christiansborg (Osu). Atinga was baptised in Nima Presbyterian Church towards the end of 1955 and took the name Paul and later joined Colin Paton to open the Sandema Mission station.<sup>10</sup> It was Paul Atinga and some members of the Nima Presbyterian Church who gathered a group of northerners at Nima which Isaac Apaabe continued to shepherd in the 1970s. This effort yielded some results as about 30 Bulsas attended church service regularly. They sat together as a group in the congregation and were allowed to sing during the service, in addition to this Isaac Apaabe was allowed to interpret the sermon to them in Buli, their mother-tongue. This patronage of Balsa in the church discontinued due to change in pastoral leadership. It was presumed that since most of them could understand some of the southern dialects, they could easily be assimilated into the church and there was therefore no need to present the gospel to them in their own language. With time, almost all of the northern people left the church, either becoming backsliders or joined other denominations.

We have stated earlier some reasons why northerners did not want to join the southern churches which includes language. The Nima Presbyterian Church's treatment to the Balsa in the church is a clear example of why they could not join the main southern churches. Mother-tongue is very powerful in missions as many people would want to hear the sermon preached in their own dialect. When the Northern Outreach Programme started in Accra by the Presbyterian Church in 1989, the Bulsas were in the majority of the Northern Community churches. Later on the Frafra ethnic group were reached out to whilst in Kumasi the Kasena and Frafra were in the majority of the NOP. We want to draw our attention to the Balsa.

### **The Balsa**

The Bulsas are located in the Upper East Region of Ghana which corresponds closely with Sandema and Fumbisi area. Today it is made up of the Balsa North and Balsa South Districts with the district capitals at Sandema and Fumbisi respectively. The people are Balsa (singular is Bulo) who speak Buli and are mistakenly called Kanjaga which is a Balsa village near Fumbisi. From this village a number of ex-slaves were recruited into the British colonial police service and the military during the first and second world wars. These first recruits made such a good impression for themselves that "Kanjagas" were in great demand both in the police and in the army. This made Bulsas who migrated to southern Ghana identified themselves as coming from Kanjaga thus the Bulsas acquired the name Kanjaga. There is a joke in Ghana about the 'Kanjaga Police' who will never take a bribe but do his work very well.

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<sup>10</sup> Colin Paton, Sandema (1) in Abraham Berinyuu, *History of the Presbyterian Church in Northern Ghana*, Accra: Asempa Publishers, 1997, p. 112

## Religious Life of the Balsa

Traditionally, Nawen is the supreme God who is the chief of the sky or the heavens. Nawen is the creator and chief of all gods and spirits, he is referred to in everyday language and activities, but no prayers or sacrifice are made directly to him. Every man and woman has a wen, a kind of divine power related exclusively to him or her yet not identified with the person or located in the person's body. There is the veneration of the ancestors by the Balsa. Kroger describes the results of a study of all 48 compounds of the village of Badoma, near Wiaga. He compiled a complete list of all the people's ancestors, and mapped the positions of the shrines in each compound.

Kroger found attitudes towards the ancestors ambivalent. On the one hand they are feared because the slightest error or offence can annoy them; on the other hand the living sometimes speak to them irreverently, with insults and treats.<sup>11</sup> Ancestors are venerated in the African society and feared as stated by Kroger but it will be sacrilegious to insult or give treats to an ancestor. The personal gods can be treated in this way because in some cases the individual go for such gods for a purpose and they can do away with them if the gods are not performing. In terms of festivals among the Balsa there is the Feok festival which is held in November every year to commemorate the victory of the Balsa over the forces of Babatu in the 1890s. There is feasting, and sacrifices of food and drink offered to the ancestors.

## Christianity

The Roman Catholic Church moved to Wiaga in 1926 after entering Navrongo in 1906. The next mission station after Navrongo was among the Balsa in Wiaga which later became a parish. A minor seminary was opened in Wiaga in 1931 which had a dual purpose of offering the opportunity for formation towards the priesthood and higher education for products of Standard III from mission schools. Besides training future priest, it was to function (as from 1936) also as a senior school to train boys who might not have the intention of becoming priests. Roman Catholic priest like Gregory Kpiebaya started his minor seminary at Wiaga from 1951-1953 and the seminary was moved from Wiaga to Tamale in 1951.<sup>12</sup> This opportunity by the Catholics to the people of Wiaga made it one of the staunch Catholic community among the Balsa.

A Presbyterian mission was opened at Sandema in 1957 with two missionaries, Collin Paton and Rev. Robert Duncan. Other stations were opened at Fumbisi in the southern Balsa which is now a pastoral station for the Presbyterian church of Ghana. The Church of Pentecost and the Seventh Day Adventist Church (SDA) began work there in 1976. The Good News Church started an active work of church-planting in 1978 and now has a missionary in Sandema. A number of other churches are in the Balsa area including Assemblies of God Church and the Methodist Church who has a pastor in Sandema. There are various spiritual churches including the Church of the Lord Brotherhood which is attracting some Bulsas.

Islam is not popular among the Balsa; very few Bulsas are Muslims. However there are trading communities called Kantosi or Yarisa in Sandema, Fumbisi, and Siniesi, possibly descendants of Zabarima slave raiders. The Balsa are mostly into traditional religion as the 1984 census shows that Bulsas are 93% traditional religion; Muslims 5% and Christianity 1%.<sup>13</sup> Bulsas who have migrated to the south of Ghana, unlike other ethnic groups, tend not to be attracted by Islam. In their migration to the south, they are not attracted to the southern way of worship due to language barrier and social differences in the churches. The Presbyterian Church was able to reach out to the Bulsas in the south.

## Migration among the Balsa

Recruitment for the colonial police and army started the habit of migration among the Balsa, where many Bulsas took up work as labourers in the south. The establishment of government and Catholic schools in

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<sup>11</sup> Franz Kroger, *Ancestor Worship among the Balsa of Northern Ghana: Religion, Social and Economic Aspects*, Hohenshaftiam: Klaus Renner Verlag, 1982, 10.

<sup>12</sup> Eugene Suom-Dery, *From 'Pagan' Boy to Church Prelate: Archbishop Kpiebaya in Northern Ghana Church History*, Hamburg: Verlag Dr. Kovac, 2017, p. 191

<sup>13</sup> Peter Barker, *Peoples, Languages, and Religion in Northern Ghana*, Accra: Asempa Publishers, 1986, p. 145

the area has accelerated the process of migration because few children pass through school and remain at home. They have no alternative than to migrate to the south of Ghana. A Catholic priest at Wiagha estimated that two out of three baptised members had migrated to the south.<sup>14</sup> Balsa communities in the south are scattered in the suburb of the main cities and towns, and are large enough to maintain their own individuality and to appoint their own chiefs. Because of these Balsa in the south tend not to be attracted to Islam.

James Agalic has a project to encourage Bulsas to return home, entitled “Rehabilitation of rural-urban migration for food production”. Many Bulsas in the south return home once in two years, some even less often because they have failed to achieve the aim with which they set out to the south.<sup>15</sup> Other northern people migrate to different places in southern Ghana, for example the Dagaaba migrate to the mining towns like Oboasi, Prestea and Tarkwa whilst the Frafra mostly migrate to Kumasi and the Balsa to Accra. In their migration they seek to embrace Christianity.

### **The Presbyterian Church of Ghana Outreach to the Balsa**

The Presbyterian Church of Ghana responded to the wake-up call by the Ghana Evangelism Committee in 1989 to reach out to northern people in the south of Ghana. The Presbyterian Church of Ghana started its outreach to northerners in the Nima area. Before this time there was an attempt by the Nima Presbyterian church to reach out to northern people in the 1970s which did not succeed. According to Solomon Sule-Saa, when he did his long vacation attachment for practical work as a student of the then Trinity College in 1987, there was no such organised group in existence. When he got to know that all the northerners had scattered, he was challenged to start the group again. He gathered seven Balsa living in “Operation Help Nima” and started prayers and Bible studies with them.<sup>16</sup> This is the genesis of the Nima Northern Outreach Programme of the Presbyterian church of Ghana.

The Northern Outreach Programme (NOP) continued to meet at the “Operation Help Nima House” for Bible studies, prayers and Church service. Literacy classes were organised for members to learn how to read the Bible in their local dialect (Buli). The NOP was structured on mono-ethnic basis such that one northern ethnic group was identified in a community to reach out to them. In the Nima community it was the Bulsas who were identified first and they responded to the gospel. The church service is always in their local language and culture which make them feel at home in the worship.

As the NOP began in Nima in 1989 with the Bulsas, members of the Bible Study and Prayer Group (BSPG) from the Nima Church assisted with reaching out to the Bulsas. By 1994 the membership of the Nima Balsa congregation was 200 and increased to 246 in 1995.<sup>17</sup> A vocational workshop was opened at Nima to train young ladies in batik, tie and dye, dress and soap making. Most Balsa women are into petty trading of fried groundnut and banana which they carry round to sell. The introduction of the vocational workshop helped the Balsa women to have a trade of their own.

In 1998 the Church purchased a house at a suburb of Nima called “Nima 441” which was demolished and a chapel has been built there. The NOP then moved from the Operation Help Nima House to their new site which is a 400 seating capacity church. They worship in their Buli language and in their culture which makes them feel at home in worship.

Other Buli churches established by the Northern Outreach Programme of the Presbyterian Church include one at Madina which was the next to be established after Nima. The rest are Zongo Junction at Laterbiokoshi, Teshie, Nungua, Tema, Dome, La all in Accra. In these Northern Outreach Programme are Bulsas who worship God in their own cultural background and language as they were doing in their home towns. This tells how the Balsa in their migration to southern part of Ghana especially in Accra continue their religion of Christianity. The Presbyterian Church through the NOP has followed them to the city of

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<sup>14</sup> Peter Barker, *Peoples, Languages and Religion in Northern Ghana*, Accra: Asempa, 1986, 163.

<sup>15</sup> James Agalic, “Sacrifice in Balsa traditional religion”, Institute of African Studies, Legon.

<sup>16</sup> Solomon Sule-Saa, “The Emergence of the Northern Outreach Programme and its impact within the Presbyterian Church of Ghana”, Unpublished B. A. Long Essay presented to Trinity College, Legon, 1996, 40.

<sup>17</sup> Solomon Sule-Saa, 71.

Accra to minister to them in their own culture. Other churches also embraced this mission to the northern migrants, the Church of Pentecost call it the Northern Outreach Ministry.

## CONCLUSION

Migration of northern people to southern Ghana offered an opportunity for Christian mission which the southern Church did not realise. There are diverse reasons why northern people migrate to the south which included to look for jobs, further education, and some mere adventure. In their migration they come with their religion so that those who are Christians will continue in their Christianity. That is not always the case because some factors in the south did not allow them to join the southern congregations in worship. These factors include language barrier, social status among others.

The Ghana Evangelism Committee held an Evangelism Consultation in 1989 to educate the Churches on how to reach out to northern migrants. Some Churches embraced the programme including the Presbyterian Church of Ghana with a mission to the northern people dubbed Northern Outreach Programme (NOP). The Balsa people were the first northern ethnic group the Presbyterian Church was able to reach out in Nima in 1989. The Balsa in their migration to the south of Ghana did not attend the southern Churches but embraced the mono-ethnic Church by the Presbyterian Church.

There is a vast mission field in southern Ghana to reach out to northern migrants. There should be a conscious effort to preach the gospel to the marginalised group of people. Southern Ghana Churches came to realise the northern people in their midst when the Ghana Evangelism Committee brought their report about the state of northern people in the south. The Presbyterian church of Ghana and other Churches took up the mantle to evangelise the northern people through mono-ethnic congregations.

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