

JOINING THE CHOIR

RELIGIOUS MEMBERSHIP
AND SOCIAL TRUST AMONG
TRANSNATIONAL GHANAIS

Nicolette D. Manglos-Weber

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*Religious Memberships and
Social Trust among
Transnational Ghanaians*



NICOLETTE D.
MANGLOS-WEBER

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Acknowledgments

WRITERS ARE OF many types. Some make linear progress, fixed on a clear vision of what they want to communicate and steadily moving toward it; others travel more irregularly, never certain of the path or its endpoint, but driven by an intuition that there is *something* to be seen and said if one keeps at it long enough. I am most certainly one of the latter.

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This book is dedicated to my father, Stephen Manglos. Most of what I need to do this kind of work, I got from him.

Central Characters

In Chicago, Evangel Ministries Congregation

- Elijah and Catherine—Married couple, pastors of Evangel Ministries, long-time residents of United States, one child
- Benjamin—Single (later married) man, member of Evangel Ministries, recent arrival in United States, no children
- Gift—Single man, member of Evangel Ministries, recent arrival in the United States, no children
- Sandra—Married woman, husband living in Ghana, member of Evangel Ministries, recent arrival in United States, one child (and one on the way)
- Anna and Timothy—Married couple, members of Evangel Ministries, long-time residents of United States, two children
- Evangeline—Married woman, member and choir director of Evangel Ministries (later left to start new Charismatic church with husband), recent arrival in United States, two children
- David—Married man, wife living in another state, choir director after Evangeline, no children

In Chicago, Other or No Religious Congregation

- Sylvia—Married woman, member of American Evangelical congregation, long-time resident of United States, no children
- Franklin—Single man, not a congregation member, recent arrival in United States, no children
- Jeremiah—Married man, leader of Ghanaian Catholic congregation, long-time resident of United States, two children, wife and children living in Ghana
- Jonathan—Single man, not a congregation member, university student, no children

In Accra, Ghana

Stephen—Single man, member of Evangel Ministries, no children

Annie—Single woman, member of Anglican congregation, no children

Ama—Single woman, member of Evangel Ministries, no children

Daniel—Soon-to-be-married man, aspiring to start new Charismatic
Evangelical church, no children

Mary—Single woman, member of Evangel Ministries, no children

*All proper names of people and religious organizations are pseudonyms unless
otherwise noted.*

I

Introduction

ON A SUMMER afternoon in downtown Chicago, within view of the Lake Michigan shoreline and Grant Park, I talked over sandwiches with Benjamin, a young man who moved from Ghana to the United States just a few years before. We met at his church, Evangel Ministries, where I had also been participating for about a month, and where we both sang with the choir each week. He told me about his privileged life back in Ghana, his hopes for obtaining his Ph.D. in the United States, and his setbacks since arriving. He couldn't pay his college tuition and so was currently out of school, working as a taxi driver. While telling his story he made a revealing comment.

"I am telling you the truth," he said, "because you are my colleague at church."

Initially I paid this statement little attention. I was more interested in how his life in Chicago had failed to meet his expectations, and in how he ended up stuck between his dreams and the reality of being an African migrant in America. Yet after more weeks and months at Evangel and more such conversations I started to realize its significance. Benjamin had said something important about how he navigated his relationships with others since his migration and how he dealt with the problem of trust.

As a foreigner having big dreams and facing big disappointments, there were many challenges to trusting others in his life, and to being trusted by them in turn. He had a lot on the line and could not afford to rely on the wrong people, whether family members, strangers, or new acquaintances. He was also often treated with suspicion or ignorance. Strangers presumed he was poor and uneducated and were hesitant to extend trust, whether in the form of an apartment lease, a job, or a friendly interaction in a grocery store. Even other Ghanaians like himself expressed distrust in him as a newcomer who might ask them for money or help down the line. Yet in spite of this he felt he could trust his church "colleagues," the people he worshiped with every Sunday and increasingly counted

as friends. Because he and I were part of this church, he decided he could trust me with the truth about his failures, frustrations, and anxieties about the future.

This book is about migrants like Benjamin who face challenges in finding trusting and trustworthy relationships, and who seek out and discover a basis of social trust in religion. Immigrant religion is often depicted as an expression of ethnic solidarity, or studied in terms of how well existing religious associations help migrants access helpful resources. Yet these stories of Ghanaians in Chicago reveal that today's migrants also make choices about where and with whom to worship; and the desire for close, personal bonds of social trust is a major concern as they do so. In turn, this process draws many of them into new or deeper commitments to religious life after migration. Their new church-based trust networks shape how they revise their goals and negotiate their identities, thus having a direct impact on their professional and personal lives.

Historically, the United States has received regular waves of newcomers. The number crossing our borders today is often portrayed as unprecedented and alarming, yet there have been earlier phases of our history with similarly high numbers of people moving into the United States. One key thing has changed, however: migrant diversity. In earlier immigration peaks, most newcomers came from Europe, and with some exceptions they were white, working-class laborers looking to escape poverty, war, or religious persecution.¹ During our current peak, however—in which about 13.1 percent of the population is foreign-born—migrants have come from all parts of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, with a wide array of backgrounds, aspirations, and expectations for their lives in the United States.² This new, more diverse migrant wave is often called the post-1965 immigration, following landmark legislation in that year that focused on attracting skilled labor, established family reunification as a major priority for allowing entry into the country, and opened new doors to larger numbers of migrants from Asia, Africa, and Latin America.³

In the 1960s, people from African countries made up a very small portion of the migrant population. Yet since then, their numbers have grown quickly. In each decade since the 1970s, the African-born population in the United States has roughly doubled, and today it is close to 2 million.⁴ This group also has some unique characteristics. Although many of them are indeed refugees, fleeing conflicts in places like Somalia and Sudan, many others are educated, English-speaking, middle- and upper-class denizens of countries with growing economies such as Ghana and Nigeria, with an intense demand for jobs and college degrees. They come with big aspirations and many social and economic resources, as compared to other migrant groups.⁵ They also tend to come from contexts where going abroad to the United States or Europe is very common, as in the Ghanaian

and Nigerian urban centers of Accra and Lagos. For example, in the 2000s, it was estimated that about 8 percent of Ghanaian university students were studying abroad; 12 percent of the Ghanaian population lived abroad; and just over half of all doctors trained in Ghana were working abroad.⁶

In American society we tend to highlight the successes of such migrants while ignoring or downplaying the obstacles they face. In 2014, many news outlets ran a story about Kwasi, a high-school student accepted into all eight Ivy League schools.⁷ Kwasi is Ghanaian. In each photograph he wore a suit and was often posed with his violin—he is an accomplished musician, as well as a stellar student. In one news outlet he was pictured with his parents, who were both born in Ghana and had worked as nurses in Brooklyn hospitals after coming to the United States. His ambition was to go to medical school. He was a modern example of the rags-to-riches, foreigner-to-model-American kind of story we love to tell.

Yet the media's celebration of Kwasi's accomplishments masks the challenges Ghanaians face in the United States and the complexity of their social and relational experiences. Being black and foreign at Harvard or Yale is not easy,⁸ and through his college years Kwasi will have to decide whether he is "mainstream" American, African American, or African in America.⁹ His dedicated parents likely struggled to establish themselves as black foreigners. They also had to decide whether and how much to instill in their children a sense of connection to that "dark" place across the ocean where they were born—a nation Americans are often unable to place accurately on a map, let alone on their mental landscape.¹⁰

Thus while African blacks seem better positioned than many other migrant groups to succeed in America, and some like Kwasi do reach impressive heights, there is a gap between what they hope for and the reality. They often do not see commensurate returns to their education in terms of earnings.¹¹ The rising cost of higher education forces many to step off their intended professional tracks and take up working-class jobs, like driving taxis, working in hair salons, and cleaning houses. They are often miscategorized as poor, uneducated, or part of the "immigrant threat," which affects their ability to compete with native-born Americans for good jobs. Their families back home expect much from them, and that pressure can often feel paralyzing.

Many of these migrants initially view their moves abroad as strategies for achieving upward mobility rather than final resettlements. Some would rather not leave Ghana in the first place, but they feel they have no choice if they want to pursue certain professions. Many of them purchase businesses and homes in Ghana while living abroad, as an anchor in the homeland and a reassurance of their eventual return. Although sometimes those dreams of return are delayed or

never achieved, particularly if they end up raising children in the United States, they still almost always desire and intend to return.

Throughout this book, therefore, I refer to my interviewees as aspirational migrants rather than immigrants, to define them in terms of their primary reasons for migration and to avoid prematurely presuming they will settle permanently. I also often use the terminology of “transnational Ghanaians,” to identify them as people who are native to Ghana but live between two, or sometimes multiple, nations. What they have in common is that they were born in Ghana, they are actively seeking to improve their life chances, they have moved abroad to do so, and they are simultaneously connected to people and places on either side of the Atlantic.

Certainly, difficulties in the initial migration process and dreams of eventual return are not unique to this group. Today’s second-, third-, and fourth-generation Irish, Germans, and Italians are descendants of yesterday’s new migrants, who also often hoped to go back to the homeland once they made their fortune. Immigrant assimilation has usually been a trans-generational process, and it is too soon to know whether these aspirational migrants will follow a similar path, eventually settling in the United States and seeing their children and grandchildren integrate into American life.

Yet there are also reasons to expect diverse integration trajectories among migrants in the current era. Based on a growing body of evidence, prominent migration scholars Alejandro Portes and Ruben Rumbaut (2014, 2001) have shown how integration into U.S. society is segmented, meaning that it looks very different for migrants of different ethnicities and nationalities.¹² It can often be stalled or reversed, and it can involve an array of positive or very negative outcomes. It can also mean that migrants experience high degrees of economic and professional integration while still holding onto a strong sense of cultural distinctiveness.

Furthermore, the advance of rapid global travel and communications technologies makes it easier than ever for new migrants to live truly transnational lives, where they are simultaneously deeply connected to both the host and the home communities (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004; Levitt 2001). This increasingly common in-between, “both and” existence further complicates the process of integration. Indeed, transnational migrants with more resources may be less likely to intend to settle permanently or to pursue citizenship in their host country (Massey and Akresh 2006). So, while the integration of past waves of immigrants may not have always been as uniform or as inevitable as it looks in retrospect, there is reason to expect even more variability, diversity, and even reversal in the process of integration among the post-1965 migrants.

For aspirational, transnational Ghanaians, religious identities and memberships are closely tied to these questions about integration, as has been historically the case for many North American immigrants. Since the early years of Protestant settlement in the New World, the growth of the United States has been bound up with the free practice of religion, and inclusion in American life has often been a matter of joining a church, temple, or synagogue. Each wave of immigrants has added to the vibrancy of American religious associations in turn, which is part of why the United States remains uniquely religious among North American and Western European countries.¹³

Over a century ago, Max Weber (1946 [1904]) observed that German immigrants in America were more invested in religious congregations than were their counterparts in the homeland. In business transactions and social life generally, he noted, strangers would commonly ask each other, “To what church do you belong?” Although America had formal church–state separation, the social significance of churchgoing appeared to be much greater in the New World than in the European countries from which most immigrants came. Fifty years later, Will Herberg (1983 [1955]) made a similar observation: “To have a name and an identity, one must belong somewhere; and more and more one ‘belongs’ in America by belonging to a religious community, which tells one *what* he is” (53).

American disestablishment of religion has also allowed grassroots movements and localized communities to determine the nature of religious membership. The local congregation, in particular, is a central institution in American life. Local congregations are voluntary and functionally diffuse, meaning they combine explicitly religious ritual with many social and even political functions (Ammerman 2005, 51ff; Warner 1994). Although usually connected to larger, bureaucratic religious organizations, they are also highly responsive to local needs and interests, often taking on distinct cultures that reflect the people who attend them and their immediate context. Increasingly, their active members are motivated by their commitment to the specific, localized community rather than to a larger organization or affiliation. Within this model, religious Americans congregate to worship, but also to have fun, build relationships, and serve their wider communities; and in so doing they create local religious associations with distinct cultures.

This model often serves new immigrants well, allowing them to meet diverse social needs in religious congregations. Many immigrant groups have therefore been drawn toward religious membership even if they weren’t very religious before migrating, and even if the traditions of their homelands, like Buddhism, Hinduism, or Islam, didn’t historically follow a congregational model. In the United States, people of many faiths and traditions have adopted the model of

congregation-based membership. This has been shown in case studies across groups from East and South Asia, Latin America, and Africa.¹⁴

Yet again, post-1965 immigrants exhibit increasing diversity in this area. Like the wider U.S. population, they increasingly view religious membership as a matter of choice rather than a fixed identity. They are less concerned to find a congregation of a particular faith or denomination, and more interested in discovering a congregation that meets their social needs. They also increasingly make a distinction between ethnic and religious identity, in which the two become decoupled and distinct (Kurien 2012). As a result, they seem less tied to the idea of worshiping with others of their own ethnic or national background, and may not even attend “immigrant churches” at all. This pattern is particularly visible among African groups.¹⁵ According to a congregation-based study done in Washington, D.C. (Foley and Hoge 2007), many African migrants attend congregations where their own nationality is not the majority.

Still, there is much to learn about why certain migrants experience religious renewal or change; why in particular some migrants gravitate toward diverse, nonmigrant congregations while others worship with those of their own ethnic or national background; and how their religious transformations in turn affect how they see themselves in relation to the new society and what they want for the future. To this point there have been few attempts to analyze diverse trajectories of religious memberships within a single migrant group, or to understand how such diverse trajectories may influence other aspects of group members’ lives. This study, therefore, was designed to answer the following questions: (1) How do Christian aspirational migrants from Ghana choose a church upon arrival in the United States?; and (2) How do their church choices and resulting memberships affect the development of their identities and goals for their migrations?

My goal in asking these questions was to get at the larger issues of integration from the perspective of migrants’ own experiences, desires, and choices, as expressed in their religious lives. Put simply, I wanted to know what Christian migrants from Ghana *want* out of their migrations to the United States and from their churches, and how the two intersect. In southern Ghana, where many transnational migrants move from, organized religion is a central institution, and Christians make up the majority. In the area around Accra, for example, 83 percent are Christians, and 74 percent are either active members or leaders of a religious group.¹⁶ This makes churchgoing a particularly good arena in which to study desires and choices that impact integration.

To answer these questions I collected stories and observations that were transnational, diverse, and spread out over time. I went to both southern Ghana and Chicago, to get a sense of the sending country and one host community; I interviewed Christian Ghanaians who attended a variety of churches or who didn’t

attend at all, in order to see whether they were more different or more similar in what they were looking for; and I got to know members of one church, Evangel Ministries, very well, so that I was able to learn their stories in depth and witness changes in their lives over a period of years. In particular, by becoming a choir member in this congregation, I was able to more fully engage in the behind-the-scenes work of the community, experience the embodied and emotional rituals of public worship, and come to know the stories of members at a deeper level. Joining the choir ultimately became the main avenue for my own integration into the community, and a meaningful symbol of racial and ethnic integration more generally.

What I found in these stories was that Ghanaian migrants often wanted to find new relations they could rely on after migration. They evaluated different religious options based on their “social feel,” and how well suited they seem to be for finding new connections. Importantly, and perhaps surprisingly, they often stated they preferred to attend with groups other than fellow migrants; but they also often had trouble finding the kind of social feel they wanted in American congregations.

When they did invest in a religious congregation, they often built new close ties with other members, and those ties expressed the characteristics of personal trust. Over time, those ties often led to a deepening religious commitment, which in turn shaped how they negotiated their identities and goals for the future. Thus I use their stories in this book to examine religion as a basis of social trust, and develop a theory of social trust as an *imaginative and symbolic activity*.

I conclude that the relationship between religious membership and immigrant integration at least partly depends on the dynamics of social trust: where and how it is formed, when it erodes, and how it shapes aspirations and identities. Religious congregations are voluntary social spaces in which such processes take place, and they can thus be particularly important integrative spaces for those who move across borders and are motivated to seek new trust networks. Ghanaian migrants are often attuned to these dynamics and want to build new ties across social divisions of race and nationality through religious association. Yet congregations can only support this pathway to integration to the extent that they truly facilitate personal trust across such boundaries. They can only bridge such divides if they are indeed able to join members in bonds of trust.

Joining the Choir

Becoming a “colleague” of Benjamin at Evangel Ministries was an experience that stretched my own imagination. It was not initially comfortable. I spent hundreds of hours in unknown settings, eating unfamiliar (and very spicy) foods,

interacting with people of different backgrounds, and learning the ropes within an organization that had its own rituals, rules, and norms of behavior. My journey was awkward and anxiety inducing as often as it was exhilarating and enlightening; and yet my own reactions and fears were perhaps the best teachers of the lessons of trust and distrust. I learned in the experience how much race and foreignness shape my own perceptions of people, and how the work of collective ritual and imagination can overcome some of these biases.

I began my research in 2009 as a foreign visitor to Accra, Ghana's coastal capital city of over 2 million people. My visit was the culmination of an interest in the new Evangelical churches of Africa, which began during several research experiences among Charismatic and Pentecostal churches in Malawi, East Africa.¹⁷ In reading about the movement I learned that some of its biggest growth—and its most prominent leaders and congregations—were in the urban centers of West Africa. If I was going to understand this major shift toward Evangelicalism in so many parts of the continent, I decided Accra was a good place to start.

It was impossible to spend much time in Accra without hearing about Evangel Ministries. It was one of several Charismatic Evangelical churches that attracted thousands of devoted participants and curious spectators to its central meeting hall every Sunday morning. Posters advertising its midweek prayer events and new books and audiovisual media lined the walls of bus stations and public buildings. Driving through the countryside outside of Accra, I spotted signs directing people to its satellite branches in homes, down alleyways, and in small rented storefronts. On Sunday mornings, smaller branches met in the hostels—dormitory-like residences—on the campus of the University of Ghana where I was staying.

Two things were apparent to me about Evangel Ministries when I first walked in the door: it is a young church and it is a global church. The music pouring out of its windows on Sunday mornings is heavy on the bass and drums. The preaching deals with subjects like dating, future goals, and getting along with parents. And because so many of Ghana's youth now have friends and family abroad, and think about emigrating as a route to a bright future of their own, Evangel Ministries reflects their transnational awareness. The leadership regularly reports on the growth of the organization's many branches of the church around the world, and discusses in depth the political and social issues that extend beyond Ghana. Aspects of global youth culture, including styles of dress and the use of technology, are everywhere in the church space.

That summer I attended midweek and Sunday services at Evangel Ministries and interviewed some of its members, asking questions about their views on religion in Ghana and what brought them to this particular church in the first place. I kept noticing how, as described later in chapter 4, their experiences at Evangel

shaped their social networks and their goals for the future. I also became curious about how Evangel's branches abroad, particularly in the United States, function in a setting where they are no longer associated with a mainstream organization but, rather, with a foreign country like Ghana. I wanted to know what these overseas branches looked, sounded, and acted like.

The following summer I went to Chicago to answer this question. I chose Chicago because Evangel Ministries has a branch there and I had also lived there in the past. I had old friends in the city and at least one personal connection to a Ghanaian friend, which guaranteed me a couch to sleep on and at least one phone number to call upon arrival. The Chicago Evangel Ministries branch was just a few years old at the time and was still small—there were about twenty consistent members and sometimes thirty to forty people present on Sunday. They mostly ranged in age from the 20s to 40s. Some were successful professionals—many worked as nurses or doctors—and others like Benjamin were still trying to find their footing. The members were almost all Ghanaian migrants to the United States, and for the time I participated there I was the only white and native-born American.

Formally, it was easy to show up and start participating. Sunday services within Protestant Evangelical Christian traditions are by nature free and open to the public. Yet even though initial entry was fairly easy, there were subtler personal barriers that I had to overcome throughout my participation. Growing up in racialized America, I had been socialized to see race as a significant marker of difference between people; and I was accustomed to being in the racial majority in most social settings. All of my knowledge and training on the variable, constructed nature of race as an idea could not eliminate the awkwardness I felt at consistently being the only white person in the room. More than anything else, I felt conspicuous, as if anything I said or did would be noted, remembered, and remarked upon. At the same time, since I put myself in the situation with the goal of research, it was hard not to worry about making mistakes and giving the other participations reasons not to trust me, which would hinder the progress of my study.

Joining the choir helped me overcome some of these obstacles. This was a group that came to the stage in the first half of every Sunday morning service and led the congregation in collective singing. Week to week, the choir ranged in size from three to ten people, usually the younger and heavily committed members of the group. One day while making small talk I revealed that I had some experience with singing, and I was soon after invited to come to a choir rehearsal and see if it was a good fit. I did, and it stuck. I spent the rest of that summer and the next singing with the choir.

We met on Saturday afternoons, in Benjamin's high-rise apartment building or in the church's rented meeting space. The rehearsals often involved meals

together, and lots of down time while waiting for someone to show up, or just lingering after our work was done. Several times choir members would surprise me with a helping of *waakye*, one of my favorite Ghanaian dishes. These meetings were my first and best informal times with Evangel's members, where I learned the best jokes and each person's small quirks. And on Sunday mornings, when we came together on the stage in our suits and dresses, and guided the rest of the congregation through the songs we had picked for that week, I felt the awkwardness and anxieties of being a stranger slip away.

I wrote this book in large part to understand and share that experience: coming in as a stranger, struggling to trust and wondering if I would be trusted, and then moving past it to a place of solidarity in spite of the wide gulfs between me and the rest of the group. I also wrote it to explore whether this experience, so personally valuable to me as a researcher, could be promoted and shared more broadly between native- and foreign-born Americans and between whites and blacks. Of course, I cannot pretend that my experience is identical to that of Ghanaian newcomers to the United States, who spend every moment of their new lives as strangers, working to avoid being perceived as a threat. Yet I do believe my experience, along with the many stories and observations I collected, taught me more general truths about how social dynamics operate and how religion intervenes in this process, and it is those ideas I mean this book to convey.

Each of the chapters that follow deals with some aspect of social trust and distrust in the experience of Ghanaians at home and abroad, and how religion functions as a portable, voluntary basis of such trust. The second chapter provides the background to the study by describing how Ghanaian migration to the United States fits within the history of Ghana's relationship to the wider world, and presenting the theoretical resources I used to understand trust and religion. The next two chapters focus on the challenges to trust in the black migrant experience and the appeal of collective religious practice, setting up the context for the relationships formed at Evangel Ministries. The fifth chapter focuses on the specifics of how trust is formed, using examples and stories to analyze the culture of connection that supports the building of personal trust networks at Evangel Ministries and churches like it. The sixth and seventh chapters deal with the impact of religious-based trust in their lives: how it helps these migrants navigate questions of identity and faith, and how this process often involves a renewal or deepening of religious commitment. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the main themes of the book and revisits the argument about the relationship between religion, as a basis of personal trust, and integration.

Everyone's story is different. But the more stories we hear and tell, the more themes start to emerge and teach us both what we have in common and what distinguishes us. My purpose in writing this book is to convey and analyze the stories

I heard, focusing on those that often go untold. I hope my readers will feel just a bit of what I've felt in response to these stories, and as a consequence greet black Africans in America with respect and compassion. I also hope in this small way to repay those at Evangel Ministries who, time and again, trusted me. They made me feel as if I did belong, despite the differences between us. In my journey I learned about sadness, disappointment, and misunderstanding; but I also learned about the nature of generosity, and about trust extended as a gift. I can never thank them enough. All I can do to invite others to see that, for African newcomers and all of us, such trust is real, possible, and indeed necessary.

The Setting

MIGRATION, SOCIAL TRUST, AND RELIGION

ALTHOUGH ASPIRATIONAL GHANAIS are a relatively new migrant group in North America, their migrations are part of a long history of interaction and exchange with foreign societies. In this chapter I give context to the current trend of Ghanaian out-migration, and I explain the factors that draw transnational Ghanaians away from home. I also address the conceptual issues involved in studying social trust and religion, present a working definition of “personal trust” as a distinct type of social trust, and describe the religious landscape of Chicago and how it presents and precludes certain options for these Christian aspirational migrants.

Ghana in the World

The geographic area that is now Ghana is located along two historically important avenues of global trade: the maritime routes connecting West Africa to Europe and the Americas, and the overland routes running along the southern edge of the Saharan Desert connecting West Africa to the Middle East and Asia. It is also an area with a long history of human civilization. Archeological evidence suggests the area was inhabited by 10,000 B.C.E.; and one of the area’s predominant local people groups, the Akans, settled in the area by the fifth century B.C.E.

During the westward expansion of the Muslim world that began in the 600s C.E., during which the cultures and economies of increasingly far-flung societies were connected, the Akan states and their neighbors began to interact extensively with Islamic civilization. They exported gold and kola nuts, among other valuable goods, and hosted foreigners from North Africa and the Middle East in their cities and towns. This early period of West African exchange with the outside world resulted in the Islamization of many local populations; and this heritage is still

observable in the predominantly Muslim northern parts of Ghana. The rise in commerce during this period also resulted in an increase in economic production and political centralization among those kingdoms best situated to take advantage of such trade, such as the Akans.¹

A second major period of exchange followed the expansion of trade throughout the Atlantic World in the Age of Sail. Historian Jonathan Thornton (1998) chronicles the rise of the Atlantic World as an increasingly integrated economic and cultural region, following innovations in sea transportation. Before the fifteenth century, maritime expeditions connecting Europe, Africa, and the Americas were rare and hazardous to undertake. After that point, though, it became more feasible to reliably transport commodities around the Atlantic World by sea. Such commodities included the natural riches coming from West Africa. Gold, silver, cocoa, and the woven textiles of the Akans were particularly valued. In fact, so much gold from the area was traded abroad that by the mid-sixteenth century most of the currency in the Netherlands was fabricated from it.²

In the late 1600s, a powerful kingdom arose and established itself over the area, the Asante Empire. The kingdom began as a clan-based Akan community that was consolidated into a major military and economic power by one king, Osei Tutu. He extended his rule outward over other Akan groups and their neighbors, and for several hundred years the empire was the dominant political force in the area. The empire developed a sophisticated central government that built upon and reinforced the clan-based, matrilineal social structure of the Akans, and was a major trading partner of the Europeans. As European trade and imperialism expanded throughout the Atlantic, the Asante Empire also provided large numbers of slaves—usually the soldiers of rival state armies captured in war—to the growing demand for bonded labor.³ English, Dutch, Portuguese, and Swedish traders built many coastal forts that served as hubs for the trade in and imprisoning of slaves, such as the still-pristine Cape Coast Castle (figure 2.1), northwest of Accra.

During this time, each of the ethno-linguistic groups in the area upheld its own local religious traditions, closely tied to the institutions of chieftaincy and ancestral lineage. For example, the Akans believed in a system of deities personifying elements in the natural world, they had one supreme god, and they considered chiefs to be divinely appointed. As mentioned, Islam had come into the area in the seventh century, and over time came to be practiced alongside local traditions, particularly in northern parts of the area. Christianity came later with the European trade, and did not have a significant local presence until the late nineteenth century. Conversion to Christianity was then widespread in the south—particularly among the Akan, Ga, and Ewe groups—while the northern regions retained their Islamic character. Through much of this period, the people



FIGURE 2.1 Cape Coast Castle.

continued to practice the local traditions in conjunction with Christianity and Islam.⁴

In the mid- and late-1800s, the relatively equal trade relationship between the Europeans and the local kingdoms of West Africa shifted. The slave trade was formally abolished, but the colonization of Africa became a core strategy in the global competition between the European powers. This was part of the imperial scramble for Africa, a process that in a relatively short period resulted in the divvying up of the continent among French, British, Belgian, Portuguese, and German holdings. At the Berlin Conference of 1884–85, hosted by Otto von Bismarck of Germany, a new map of Africa was drawn that gave the various powers a collective mandate to establish imperial control in their designated areas. This story is vividly explained by Adam Hochschild (1999) as the end product of Europe's growing military dominance, strategic moves by various kings and presidents to enhance their geopolitical positions, and a developing image of Africans as pagan, brutish, and uncivilized.⁵

At the Berlin Conference, areas including and surrounding the Asante Empire were allocated to the British, who were by that time the Asantes' most active European trading partners. Although the Asante Empire had enjoyed military