

# Christianity, Citizenship, and Political Engagement among Ghanaian Youth

TRACY KUPERUS and RICHARD ASANTE

**Abstract:** This article focuses on how Christianity impacts youth understandings of citizenship and political engagement in Ghana. Based on field work carried out in Ghana in 2018 involving focus groups and church elite interviews, Ghanaian youth affiliated with mainline and charismatic traditions can articulate religious messaging regarding political engagement, but their own notions of citizenship are informed independently. Second, infrequent churchgoers are more cognizant of their rights and notions of active citizenship compared with frequent churchgoers. Finally, some of the most engrained attitudes toward citizenship among African youth appear to be rooted in class rather than religion.

**Keywords:** African youth, citizenship, religion, political engagement, Christianity

## Introduction

African youth, defined in this paper as those eighteen to thirty-five years old, are estimated to be about sixty-five percent of the total population of Africa.<sup>1</sup> The African continent has the “world’s highest share of young people relative to the total population.”<sup>2</sup> Africa’s youth are presented dichotomously in the academy and in policy circles—African youth are violent troublemakers or peaceful activists, prone to peril or promise, evidenced as a challenge or an opportunity. African youth, despite copious amounts of alienation and marginalization, have been active political actors.<sup>3</sup> Their political engagement is variegated—from mobilization on behalf of good governance campaigns to engagement in voter intimidation to efforts at community development. Left unexplored is what role religion, more specifically Christianity, might play in shaping African youth understandings of citizenship and political engagement.

Scholarship addressing the rapid increase in Christian adherents on the continent and the role that Christian organizations play in national politics exists, but the intersection of religion, youth, and citizenship is virtually untouched.<sup>4</sup> If youth comprise a growing segment within African Christianity and build their social networks, in part, through religious organizations, what role might Christianity play in influencing how youth view citizenship and political

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engagement? This study will describe the different messaging about citizenship and political engagement Ghanaian youth are exposed to from Christian religious organizations as well as the impact of that messaging on youth perceptions of citizenship.<sup>5</sup>

Based on a qualitative assessment of focus group discussions in and around Accra, our research demonstrates that Christianity does influence how Ghanaian youth describe political engagement, but not necessarily their understanding of citizenship. The differences in understandings of citizenship, moreover, are greater between frequent/infrequent churchgoers in this study than between Ghanaian youth who are regular churchgoers within the charismatic and mainline traditions. Finally, religion does not explain the notable differences among this cohort of Ghanaian youth regarding their understandings of citizenship and political engagement as much as class or income.

After a brief discussion of the Ghanaian case and the research design, this paper reviews the literature pertaining to political participation among African youth, citizenship, and religion and politics. The third part of the paper summarizes the political messaging Ghanaian Christian organizations offer regarding citizenship and political engagement. The fourth and fifth sections of the paper offer findings related to Ghanaian youth understandings of citizenship within the context of religion and income. The conclusion discusses the significance of the paper's findings on the literatures of citizenship, African youth, and religion and politics.

### **The Case of Ghana and Research Methods**

Ghana is an appropriate country in which to investigate the questions of Christianity, political engagement, and citizenship among Ghanaian youth for at least three reasons. First, Ghana is a highly religious country. According to the 2010 census, ninety-four percent of Ghanaians are religious with seventy-one percent claiming to be Christians.<sup>6</sup> The Christian landscape is diverse with Pentecostals, charismatics, and evangelicals gaining in prominence but co-existing with large numbers of mainline Protestants and Catholics. Muslims constitute about eighteen percent of the population. Religion permeates the lives of Ghanaians from the religious slogans found on public transportation and small businesses to the hubbub of prayer meetings, evangelizing, and worship services occurring daily. Finally, religiosity among Ghanaians has been confirmed by polls that measure active membership in religious groups, the frequency of prayer and worship attendance, or religion's importance in one's life.<sup>7</sup>

Second, the public spaces filled by religious organizations in Ghana are innumerable. Religious organizations, particularly Christian ones, adopt prominent political roles. The Christian Council of Ghana, the National Catholic Secretariat, and the International Central Gospel Church (ICGC) are a few examples of the noteworthy Christian institutions that have commented regularly on public policy (e.g. illegal gold mining or *galamsey*, electoral reform, judicial corruption).<sup>8</sup> These organizations exist in a politically stable, constitutional democracy, but Ghana struggles with, among other things, an under-resourced judiciary, a disproportionately powerful executive, and socioeconomic inequality.<sup>9</sup> Within this political environment, Christian institutions have contributed, both positively and negatively, to the process of the country's nation-building and democratization efforts.<sup>10</sup>

Third, Ghana has a youthful population with a median age of twenty-one years. Fifty-seven percent of Ghana's population is under the age of twenty-four, while seventy-nine

percent are less than forty years old.<sup>11</sup> Ghanaian youth represent “more than sixty percent of Ghana’s labor force and voting population,” and Ghanaian youth played a dominant role in Ghana’s struggle for independence and in the first years of its democracy.<sup>12</sup> Despite national policy documents depicting Ghanaian youth as a major resource for social and political development and the call for the empowerment and mainstreaming of youth into national structures, Ghanaian youth are largely underrepresented in the formal political establishment.<sup>13</sup> Inadequate educational services and limited employment opportunities also provide significant barriers to Ghanaian youth developing into flourishing adults.<sup>14</sup>

Fieldwork research for this article took place over three weeks between June and July 2018. We adopted a broad view of citizenship, recognizing that it may include political and community involvement, as well as identities and relationships, but we assumed most participants would define it within the context of the rights and responsibilities of individuals within the confines of a state. Political engagement is understood as a form of activism that seeks to influence policies, political structures, or communities in ways that benefit society. We gathered two sources of data in and around Accra with the help of a Ghanaian research assistant: six qualitative church elite interviews, and fourteen focus groups with Ghanaian youth.

First, we conducted open-ended interviews with six church elites, three affiliated with mainline Protestantism and Roman Catholicism, and three associated with Pentecostal, charismatic, or evangelical Christianity.<sup>15</sup> Second, we conducted fourteen focus groups. Half of the focus groups occurred with youth who were “frequent church attenders” - defined as those who attend church more than six times in three months. The other half of the focus groups happened with youth who were ‘infrequent church attenders’ - defined as those who attend church fewer than six times in three months. Focus groups occurred in high and low-income neighborhoods in and around Accra (equally divided), and all but two were divided into male and female cohorts. An equal amount of focus groups in the frequent church attender category happened among youth affiliated with mainline Protestant and charismatic churches in both the low and high-income neighborhoods.

The empirical material from the focus groups was coded using NVivo software. Coding terms were forged based on the understanding of citizenships that emerged from the interviews. The coding method and NVivo analysis allowed us to grasp the similarities and differences among Ghanaian youth concerning their understanding of citizenship.

### **Literature Review: Youth, Religion, and Citizenship**

Youth should be given a chance to take an active part in the decision-making at local, national and global levels. -- United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon<sup>16</sup>

Political leaders, as evidenced by Ban Ki-Moon’s statement above, and regional and national protocols like the African Youth Charter, view youth as a key source of human capital around which social and political development should occur. National youth policies and international reports also encourage youth political participation. Scholarly literature, however, portrays African youth as holding an unpromising political future. African youth are marginalized—

politically, socially, and economically.<sup>17</sup> They are described as a ‘lost generation’ or a generation in ‘waithood’ that is finding the transition from youth to adulthood difficult due to the lack of educational and economic opportunities.<sup>18</sup> Alienation leads to rational albeit problematic political behaviors—youth are a natural opposition, having so little to lose and being so resentful of the situation in which they find themselves, that they are prone to political violence, radicalism, and instability, or, they are poorly equipped at articulating their needs within a narrow political space such that they are predisposed to manipulation by elders and elites.<sup>19</sup>

Empirical studies that examine the political behavior of African youth as a composite indicate that despite significant amounts of alienation, they resist engaging in violence and are only marginally more involved in protesting than older Africans.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, African youth engage in a variety of political behaviors. They have mobilized on behalf of anti-colonial and good governance campaigns, participated in voter education and voter intimidation, and been involved in local income-generating activities and community development projects, both legal and illegal.<sup>21</sup> Finally, over the past decade, African youth have adopted innovative strategies involving social media, hip hop, and protest to mobilize against third term bids, constitutional manipulation, corruption, and electoral fraud in Burkina Faso, Senegal, Zimbabwe, and Uganda.<sup>22</sup>

Still, the politics of ‘waiting’ and ‘envy’ are realities among African youth. Feelings of marginalization lead to dissatisfaction with politics and less interest in its engagement. Lekalake and Gyimah-Boadi, in an extensive study of African youth political participation, have shown that the rate of youth participation in the formal politics of voting and community mobilizing is lower than that of their older counterparts.<sup>23</sup> In truth, African youth at an absolute level perform better than their peers in other parts of the world regarding participation in formal politics, but considering the range of forces that diminish the opportunities for African youth, including limited economic opportunities, asymmetric relations between citizens and leaders, poor educational opportunities, and a feeling of tokenism in decision making, the consensus among scholars is this: how can African youth be empowered to participate in the political arena in a meaningful way that contributes to societal and individual flourishing?<sup>24</sup> Left unexplored in this discussion is the role that religion, or Christianity more specifically, might play in shaping African youth understandings of citizenship and political engagement.

Scholars have examined the rapid increase in Christian adherents on the continent and the role that Christian organizations play in national politics, but they have not addressed the intersection of religion, youth, and citizenship.<sup>25</sup> If youth comprise a growing segment within African Christianity and build their social networks, in part, through Christian religious organizations, one of the most trusted social actors on the continent, what role might these organizations and the elites within them play in influencing how youth view citizenship and political engagement?

Christian organizations form one of the largest civil society actors mediating the relationship between state and society on the African continent. They were particularly prominent in the ‘third wave’ of democratization.<sup>26</sup> Churches and religious organizations contribute to democratic consolidation when they foster civility, hold government accountable, provide an empowered space for marginalized groups, and promote the welfare of the

populace at large.<sup>27</sup> African youth, then, observe the actions of churches and Christian organizations within their country. Do Christian organizations encourage political engagement and if so what kind? Do they counter corruption, engage in election monitoring, mediate peace, promote particular socio-political or moral issues, and/or encourage economic development? Finally, do religious organizations encourage youth leadership in terms of building a strong political community?

Churches and parachurch organizations have capitalized on things like institutional resources and theological traditions to forge a cohesive public theology that informs its adherents about citizenship and political engagement.<sup>28</sup> Religious elites (e.g. pastors or priests) articulate public theology through verbal messages (sermons), communiques and memos, and institutional programs.<sup>29</sup> African youth attending church services or participating in church programming are exposed to these messages on a regular basis.

There are, however, at least two divergent public theologies that dominant the African continent.<sup>30</sup> Pentecostal, charismatic, and evangelical religious messaging—shortened to ‘charismatic’ for the purpose of this article—often focuses on leadership development, individual agency, the duty to elect ethical people, and obedience to authority.<sup>31</sup> African pastors who are rooted in charismatic Christian traditions have stressed political engagement more recently, but generally it is a political engagement that does not challenge the status quo or demand systemic change. Rather, Christians have been encouraged to pray for the country and root out corruption. They are also reminded to elect morally upright leaders, to ward off Islamic encroachment, and to reform cultural values and practices.<sup>32</sup> In contrast, mission churches (i.e. mainline Protestant and Catholic churches), spurred on by more prophetic theological traditions, are understood to be more cognizant of structural injustice in the African context. Mainline Christianity has historically assumed its followers will be actively engaged in politics. If the state does not allow for the flourishing of its citizens, even undermining their dignity and abusing their rights, the religious elites associated with these networks have urged resistance to the state. Christians are also expected to hold governments accountable to the norms of justice and transparency and to invest in the common good, displaying elements of tolerance toward other religious traditions.<sup>33</sup>

In addition to promoting different understandings of political engagement, Christian traditions tend to highlight different notions of citizenship. In the African context, the concept of citizenship is heavily contested. Liberal notions of citizenship, with more narrowly defined understandings of identity (individual), citizen rights (political), and the state, are often at odds with communal understandings that recognize broader identities (ethnic, community, or country) and highlight responsibilities as well as rights.<sup>34</sup> Colonial and postcolonial politics that cater to elites and neocolonial interests have distanced many Africans from liberal notions of citizenship.<sup>35</sup> African citizens then often hold coexisting notions of citizenship, namely, legalistic, participatory, and/or communal views.<sup>36</sup>

With the different understandings of political engagement in various Christian traditions, one would expect these traditions to highlight different notions of citizenship (see Table 1). The charismatic tradition of highlighting individual agency and ‘right living’ overlaps more closely with the legalistic understanding of citizenship that stresses law abidance and individual morality, while the mainline tradition’s emphasis on social justice and public service appears to

overlap more closely with participatory and communal understandings of citizenship that emphasize societal participation, 'building the country' and looking out for others.

**Table 1: Conceptions of Citizenship and Christian Traditions**

	Legalistic	Participatory	Communal (local or national)
Key Components	(Political) rights highlighted over responsibilities; focus on individual, emphasizes the basic obligations of the citizen	Responsibilities and rights both highlighted; individuals work with others to foster change and secure rights	Responsibilities stressed over rights; socially embedded community belonging
Theoretical Expectations	Youth attending charismatic churches	Youth attending mainline churches	Youth attending mainline churches
Empirical Operationalization in Focus Group Discussions	Law-abiding and morality	Participator; Rights	Community-focused; build country

In this article, we are interested in whether or not the political engagement and public theology within mainline and charismatic religious institutions in Ghana coalesce with the narratives explained above and whether or not they affect African youth understandings of citizenship and political engagement. For frequent churchgoers, do their views mimic or diverge from the dominant Christian traditions? What differences regarding political engagement exist between frequent and infrequent churchgoers, and what factors besides religion bear weight? To answer these questions, we begin with an overview of the political role of Ghanaian Christian institutions.

### **Public Theology and Political Engagement of Ghanaian Christian Organizations**

The role played by Ghanaian Christian organizations coalesces with the broad patterns on the continent regarding public theology and political engagement. Religious elites and organizations connected with mainline denominations have encouraged followers to be politically engaged for the sake of forwarding democracy and good governance in Ghana. The Christian Council in Ghana (CCG) and the National Catholic Secretariat (NCS), in particular,

have been on the forefront of religious political engagement, even before Ghana's independence.<sup>37</sup> Both organizations are known for highlighting abuses of governmental power and promoting the welfare of the population at large.<sup>38</sup> A few of the important political contributions that the CCG and NCS have made in Ghana include their watchdog status during military rule in the 1970s and 1980s; calling out human rights abuses and rejecting arbitrary trials; playing a prominent role in Ghana's return to constitutional democracy in the early 1990s and serving on Ghana's Constituent Assembly; and during national elections, encouraging Ghanaians to vote, organizing hundreds of electoral observers, and mediating tense electoral outcomes.<sup>39</sup>

Interviews with church elites associated with mainline Christianity in Ghana confirmed a prophetic public theology. The General Secretary of the CCG, Cyril Fayose, summarized the CCG's model of political engagement in the following way:

One of the core mandates of the CCG is to be the 'voice for the voiceless'...In other words, we must speak truth to the authorities that be. We must help in the development of not only the country but also the citizens, the people in the country – the total, holistic development of our people...We are constantly engaging the government. Where they are not doing so well, we point that out. Where they are doing very well, we commend them. We believe that Christians should engage and take part in political discourse.<sup>40</sup>

Understandings of citizenship among mainline pastors and priests are a mix, including references to legalistic citizenship (e.g., "You must observe the rules and regulations of your country"), but lengthier conversations revealed the commitment to participatory and communal understandings of citizenship. A classic communal understanding of citizenship—rooted in country or national responsibilities—was articulated by Reverend Abamfo Ofori Atiemo, Pastor of Grace Congregational Presbyterian Church in East Legon: "When we say someone is a good citizen, from my perspective, it is somebody who feels a strong belonging to a country and because of that is prepared to stand for or even work for the good of the country without necessarily being compelled or pushed either by law or by another person of authority."<sup>41</sup> Reverend Atiemo also described a participatory view of citizenship later in the interview: "We have come from a heritage that has always encouraged participation and also taken critical perspectives on national issues without fear. We must ... equip our pastors to mobilize our members. I advocate for real activism, so that your faith must count."

Charismatic churches follow the broad contours of African public theology as well. The Pentecostal, charismatic, and evangelical traditions in Ghana are diverse and maturing. Forty years ago, these Christian traditions either espoused a reluctance for political participation or were co-opted by the Rawlings regime for instrumentalist purposes.<sup>42</sup> Today, these churches in Ghana, by and large, encourage their followers to be engaged in politics. In the words of Joseph Quayesi-Amakye, "Although the church as a body must not enter politics directly, nonetheless it is a good place for assembling good and honest politicians."<sup>43</sup> Christians need to be involved in the political sphere to humanize it with Christian principles. Christians can also serve as 'salt and light' in Ghanaian society and function as the moral conscience of the nation, in addition to helping society attain tranquility and development.<sup>44</sup> As a result, evangelical pastors like

Mensa Otabil and organizations like National Association of Charismatic and Christian Churches (NACCC) are almost as ubiquitous in Ghana's public spaces as the CCG and NCS when it comes to calls for peace during national elections or commentary on social issues.

These ideas and realities were confirmed in interviews with Pentecostal, evangelical, and charismatic elites. Bishop Samuel Opare Lokko, affiliated with Action Chapel International, summarized the charismatic philosophy regarding political engagement with these words, "We are supposed to be active participants in civil matters, not passive citizens. We are supposed to pray according to the book of Timothy, to pray for our leaders. We are supposed to get involved by our moral character and all that. To be a good example. Jesus said we are the light and salt of this world."<sup>45</sup> Views of citizenship among the charismatic pastors tended to highlight the need to be law-abiding. Reverend Frempong, a lead pastor of International Central Gospel Church, Adenta, for example, described a good citizen as "One who obeys the laws of the country, and is always prepared for his part as far as the socioeconomic, religious, or whatever is concerned. Number one it is about obeying rules and regulations."<sup>46</sup>

In sum, the mainline and charismatic traditions in Ghana follow the broad contours of the African continent regarding political engagement and public theology. Do the different understandings of political engagement and citizenship filter down to African youth? What differences regarding understandings of political engagement and citizenship exist between youth who are frequent and infrequent church attenders? If significant differences exist, is it faith and religious practice that influence Ghanaian youth attitudes toward political engagement and citizenship, or do other factors, like class, bear greater weight? To answer these questions, we turn to the results from focus group discussions.

### **Ghanaian Youth, Religion, and Citizenship**

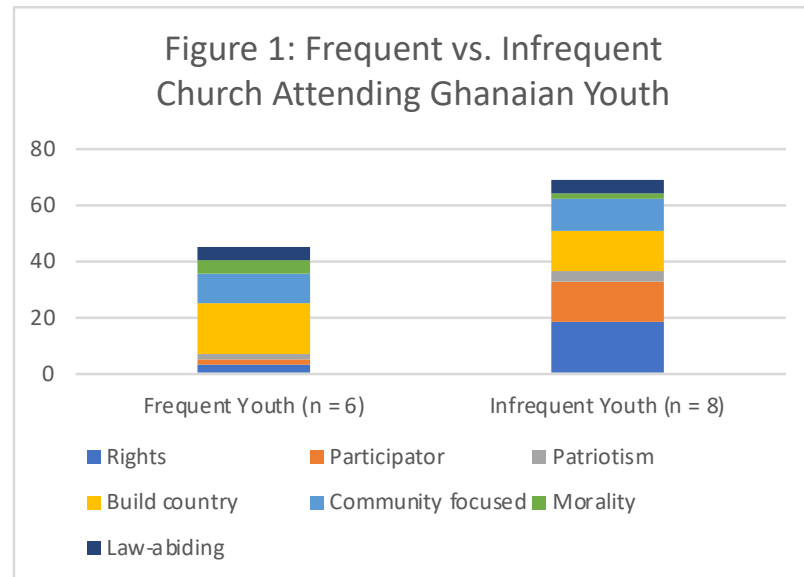
In each focus group, we asked young people to define what it meant to be a good citizen and to describe what a good citizen did every day. We expected youth in different contexts (for example, high, and low income) to identify different elements of citizenship. This occurred, but nearly every focus group discussion centered around seven different understandings of citizenship: law-abiding, morality, community, building the country, patriotism, participation, and rights. The graphs and columns that follow illustrate the frequency or average number of references to aspects of citizenship that occurred within the different categories of youth per focus group for a particular category (e.g., high income, frequent church attender). For each figure, 'n' equals the amount of focus groups per category.

One of the first points of comparison to explore are the responses of frequent and infrequent churchgoers (see figure 1). We found that Ghanaian youth who were infrequent churchgoers within the focus groups were far more likely to understand citizenship in the context of rights (bottom blue band) and participation (orange band) than their frequent church-attending counterparts, while frequent church attenders are slightly more inclined to understand citizenship from the perspective of building the country (yellow band) and morality (green band) than their infrequent church-going counterparts.

The difference in these columns mainly arises in the understanding of citizenship as rights and participation among the infrequent churchgoers. When asked about how one expresses one's citizenship, an infrequent churchgoer said, "Through elections! As a citizen, you have to



partake in elections. You are to exercise your franchise and choose the right person...but we also need to organize ourselves and work on the part which needs attention."<sup>47</sup> This person spoke to specific issues that required mobilization within his community, namely sanitation. Another young person stated, "A good citizen is someone who serves as a watchdog in her or her society or country."<sup>48</sup> Finally, one young person connected with a civil society organization in Legon said, "A good citizen is one who is able to monitor the government...to make sure that rights are not violated, to make sure that the standard of governance actually conforms to the universal standard of governance as we know it."<sup>49</sup>



Understandings of citizenship based on rights and participation were nearly absent among frequent churchgoers. The more prevalent response among frequent churchgoers centered around an understanding of citizenship that focused on building the country or community. One frequent churchgoer in Pantang expressed the communal-national understanding of citizenship in stipulating that "A good citizen has decided that the wellbeing of the country is what he/she will seek."<sup>50</sup> Another young person said, "A good citizen commits himself or herself to ensure the betterment of the country."<sup>51</sup> Finally, one young person expressed the communal-local understanding: "At the end of the day, being a good citizen means that I am an individual, but then I am a member of the whole community. For example, we help someone who lacks clothes. We are helping out with the little things that help the community."<sup>52</sup>

Contributing to the building of Ghana and strengthening community, though, were sizeable themes in all the focus groups. The yellow and baby blue bands are notable in all the figures provided in this paper. One young woman in Pantang, an infrequent church attender, nearly mimicked the view of frequent churchgoers when she said: "A good citizen works very hard to contribute to the welfare of the country."<sup>53</sup> Another infrequent church attender said: "A

good citizen is someone who involves himself/herself in the activities of the communities for them to go well.”<sup>54</sup>

The fact that many of the Ghanaian youth in our focus groups understood citizenship primarily as ‘building the country’ could be an outcome of Ghana’s history and its current political situation. Ghana was the first country south of the Sahara to become independent. Kwame Nkrumah’s nationalist and socialist vision for Ghana included funding national infrastructure projects, bolstering the national education system and a national and Pan-African culture, so intuitively this notion of citizenship could be deeply rooted in the sub-conscious of many young Ghanaians. In other words, Ghana’s nation building project enigmatically embarked upon by Kwame Nkrumah and other leaders at independence promotes in young Ghanaians the goal of contributing to the building of a united and prosperous society.

Additionally, Ghana’s current political situation could also foment this understanding of citizenship. Although Ghanaian youth face innumerable challenges, they have also heard about or witnessed a number of positive political developments, for example, a transition from military dictatorship to a liberal, constitutional democracy, twenty-nine years of steady democratic progress, and Ghana’s movement from a low-income to a middle-income country. Ghanaian youth may be motivated to invest in the continued development of their country as one of the continent’s success stories.

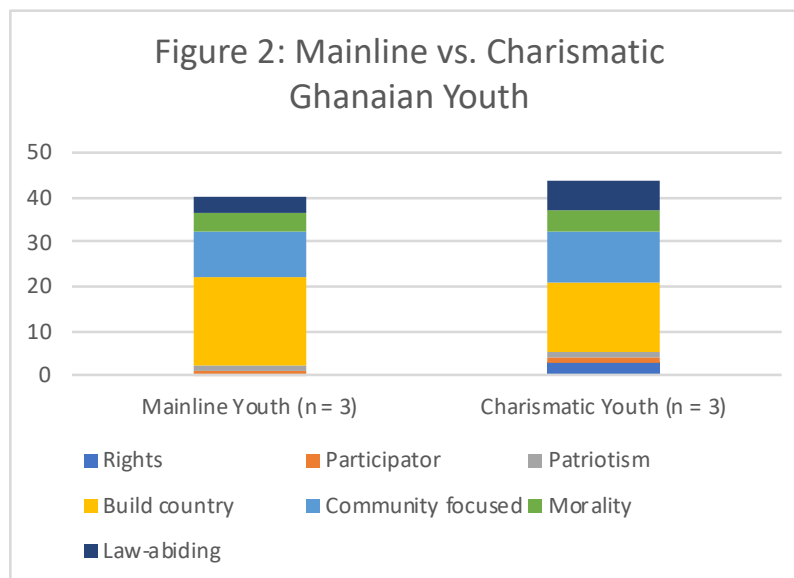
When probed about what good citizenship entails, focus group participants were also consistently responsive to communal understandings of citizenship. Participants stated that good citizens help “the country move forward because we are all one people,” and “sacrifice for the country when there is a problem.”<sup>55</sup> The following quote represented a typical response rooted in a communal-local view of citizenship: “I know I have to make any contribution. When they are doing communal labor, I go out and support...We help someone who lacks clothes to cover up. That is how I contribute to my community.”<sup>56</sup> Ghanaian youth were certainly aware of the more liberal understandings of citizenship, but the predominant response centered around community (and country) as well as the need for volunteering and prioritizing development needs over one’s individual interests for the sake of harmonious relations.<sup>57</sup> This result is notable in that it signifies the narrower, individualistic understanding of citizenship was not normative among this cohort of Ghanaian youth. Despite the continuation of neocolonialism in Africa’s economic sectors, African understandings of self within country manifests communal appreciation.<sup>58</sup>

Going back to frequent churchgoing Ghanaian youth, there were a few more references to understanding citizenship in the context of morality compared to infrequent churchgoing youth. A respondent in Pantang who attended a Presbyterian church offered a typical response in this way: “As a good citizen...I stay away from drugs, and alcohol, and things that endanger my life...Because if you have life, as the Bible says, you have everything.”<sup>59</sup> Overall, though, such responses were surprisingly underrepresented among frequent church attending Ghanaian youth. Indeed, one would expect the responses in three of the seven understandings of citizenship to be much higher among frequent churchgoers than they were. More pointedly, charismatic public theology and understandings of appropriate political engagement line up with the law-abiding and moral understandings of citizenship while mainline public theology

and understandings of appropriate political engagement coalesce with building the country and participation, yet besides ‘building the country’ these elements of citizenship hardly appeared among frequent churchgoing Ghanaian youth.

It could be that frequent churchgoing youth observe actions from religious organizations and hear messages from religious elites that reference the need to be respectful of governing authorities as opposed to infrequent church attenders, a response that was common among our interviews with church elites, particularly the charismatics. Youth who are members of churches might assume, then, that good Christians need to obey the government and not claim their rights, hold government accountable, or challenge it. This finding was affirmed in the focus groups insofar as infrequent churchgoers expressed considerable negativity toward political leaders, an outcome that was not as prevalent in the frequent church attending focus groups.<sup>60</sup> However, if mainline Christianity’s public theology encourages critical engagement with political authorities, why didn’t more of the citizenship understandings include participation?<sup>61</sup>

Results that counter what one might expect, given the specific public theology within mainline and charismatic traditions, continue when looking at figure 2 comparing youth who are frequent churchgoers in mainline and charismatic churches.



The two columns in this figure provide further evidence that mainline and charismatic youth share remarkably similar understandings of citizenship. Slightly more mainline Ghanaian youth understood citizenship within the context of ‘building the country’ (yellow band) than their charismatic counterparts, and slightly more charismatics understood citizenship as law-abiding (navy blue band at top)—results that line up with the public theology in the two traditions. But the overall picture is one of similarity, or an understanding of citizenship based off the need to ‘build one’s country’ (yellow band) or ‘contribute to the community’ (baby blue). As to the latter, mainline and charismatic focus group participants said things like good citizens “think about the welfare of the nation,” help “the country move forward because we are all one people,” and “good citizenship involves any actions that give back to your community.”<sup>62</sup>

When asking church attenders about the political messages they received in their churches, another question we asked focus group participants later in the group interview, differences regarding political engagement emerged along the classic mainline/charismatic youth emerged. Youth affiliated with the charismatic tradition mentioned that the political messages they received from their churches involved “setting good examples to their Christian sisters and brothers” and praying and raising up godly leaders.<sup>63</sup> A young person affiliated with ICGC in Pantang said, “We pray that God should help us raise godly leaders. Because this is where I think change will come. Yes, we lead, because if governance is disconnected from Christianity, then there is a problem.”<sup>64</sup> Youth affiliated with a Charismatic Evangelistic Ministry church in Legon stated that the messages from the pulpit were less about politics and more about business and leadership: “Our youth pastor does not really ask us to go directly into politics, but through our Bible studies, we learn lots about business, entrepreneurship and leadership roles and qualities.”<sup>65</sup> In sum, the messages about political engagement youth received from charismatic churches were closely aligned with the public theology of religious tradition. Namely, if Christians engage the political sector, they should be excellent role models and people of integrity. Obedience to political authority was expected, and Christians could be the ‘salt and light’ who model righteous behavior in society.

Likewise, the youth affiliated with mainline denominations echoed some of the public theology messaging when they mentioned their calling to those who are marginalized. A young woman from a Presbyterian congregation in Pantang said, “Every good citizen doesn’t only think about himself/herself alone, but also others as well. For example, when I am in a car and get to Madina and see the beggars, I ask myself, ‘what can I do?’ Every good citizen needs to think about the vulnerable.”<sup>66</sup> Moreover, in the high-income mainline focus group discussions, there was recognition that political engagement was expected, that Christians needed to invest in their community to forward the common good, and there was a call to consider large scale systemic change. One young woman who attended Trinity United Church in Legon said, “So during our Bible study periods, we have a book and then there are various topics in the book. One dealt with citizenship and civic life. We were discussing our roles as citizens. Someone who works with the tax authority came to tell us about the taxes and what the system is like, and how to get involved.”<sup>67</sup> Other participants in this focus group mentioned events in the church that addressed health care in Ghana and the pervasiveness of corruption and what they could do as citizens to combat it.

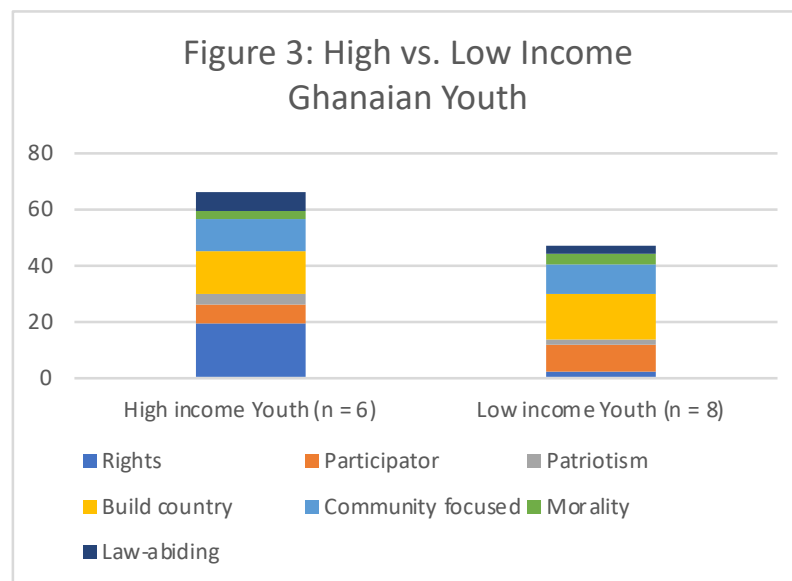
As a composite, then, we learned that when Ghanaian youth who attended mainline and charismatic churches were asked about political engagement, they could articulate the public theologies of the two Christian traditions focused on in this project. But the more interesting outcome was the negligible difference between youth understandings of citizenship within these traditions. Youth who attended charismatic churches did not highlight morality and law-abiding understandings of citizenship in substantial numbers over and against their mainline counterparts. And youth who attended mainline congregations hardly mentioned rights or participation. Youth can articulate what their church tradition’s expectation of appropriate political engagement is, but Ghanaian youth seemed to form their own understanding of citizenship independent of church elites. Why might this be the case?

Perhaps we did not interview enough Ghanaian youth. A national, random sample of Ghanaian youth from different religious traditions might expose significant differences in understandings of citizenship. Second, it could be that understandings of citizenship are not as revealing as individual level understandings of political engagement. We did not ask this cohort of Ghanaians, “What is your understanding of appropriate political engagement?” If we had, perhaps the answers would have coalesced with specific Christian traditions’ understandings of political engagement as religious elites and organizations talk openly about political engagement but less so about citizenship.

Another plausible answer, though, is that Ghanaian youth are more influenced by the political messaging they receive outside the church or from social networks that connect Ghanaians with their country’s needs and development.<sup>68</sup> A communal understanding of citizenship, whether rooted in nation building or one’s local community, arises from a political culture that emphasizes groups over and against individuals.<sup>69</sup> Ghana’s independence struggle and its democratic success since 1992 form the main backdrop to Ghanaian youth understandings of citizenship. In the past twenty-nine years, Ghana has won praise as a model of democracy, the rule of law has taken root, and the constitution has become an important reference document related to the enjoyment of freedom and human rights. Ghanaian youth are committed to political development at the national or local level—a commitment that is ensconced in messages received from their families, schools, the news, and so forth.<sup>70</sup> Finally, there are other factors like class or income that appear to influence how Ghanaian youth view citizenship.

### Ghanaian Youth, Income, and Citizenship

Some of the most intriguing differences emerge among Ghanaian youth when comparing youth along income lines (see figure 3).



High income Ghanaian youth understand citizenship as building country and community (yellow and baby blue bands), but also as law abidance (navy blue band on top) and rights focused (bottom blue band). The latter two understandings are almost absent among the low-

income focus group participants. Low-income Ghanaian youth mainly highlight building country and community, although participation also factors in.

High income youth referenced the need to follow and obey the laws in the following way: “A good citizen is someone who follows the law and accepts the law” or “A good citizen is someone who respects the rule of the government and abides by the law set for us.”<sup>71</sup> High income youth were also aware of their rights. One young man from East Legon said, “To be a citizen, it means that the state confers some rights unto the person...The state protects you by giving you the right to freedom of speech, the right to association, and many more.”<sup>72</sup> A young woman in Legon mimicked this response by saying, “A good citizen means you are protected by some rights, you have rights and are conscious of them.”<sup>73</sup>

An understanding of participation, the community, and nation building predominated among low-income Ghanaian youth. One young woman associated with a microenterprise organization in Pantang represented the typical response within this category by saying, “A good citizen is one who works very hard for the country. She does everything possible to contribute to the development of the country.”<sup>74</sup> A response that picked up the community and the nation building notions of citizenship came from a young man in Pantang when he said, “If we are making decisions, let’s say to help the community grow, and I contribute my ideas and the idea is implemented and it works, then that part of the country has developed in a particular way and I’m being a good citizen.”<sup>75</sup> Finally, low-income participants were also cognizant of the idea of citizenship as participation in responses like the following: “When we say a good citizen, he looks at what is happening in the country and participates in what is happening. He/she will not say that this is for the government to do, so I will allow it to deteriorate.”<sup>76</sup>

The differences expressed above, namely, citizenship understood in a variegated fashion highlighting law-abidance, rights, community, and nation building (high income) versus a focus on participation, improving your country or contributing to your community (low income) continued in the focus group discussions when participants were asked to explain why they were or were not interested in politics or when they were asked to describe the sociopolitical issues that interested them. For example, when asking youth residing in low and high-income neighborhood whether or not they followed politics (how interested are you in politics/government?), many of the focus group participants in high income neighborhoods admitted that they had lost interest. It simply was not worth their time to listen to politics. They described Ghana as a place where political favors were distributed to family members or community projects started under one party were abandoned when the opposing political party came into power. Because of corruption, they had become less interested in politics and had stopped reading the news or being politically engaged.<sup>77</sup> Additionally, high income youth could choose to opt out of politics. They admitted that although public policy impacted their lives (“policies will affect how comfortable I am in life or if I am able to do business or something”), they were not too worried about politics because if government officials did not follow through, they could find other means to meet their needs besides relying on the government.<sup>78</sup>

In contrast, when participants from low-income neighborhoods were asked the same question, many of them said they were definitely interested in politics. They too were

frustrated when community projects started by one political party were abandoned by another political party, but rather than giving up on politics, low-income people expressed a desire to stay involved in politics to hold politicians accountable. “They are not playing their roles. We need to hold them accountable, because we pay taxes and we know the roles of the assembly, and they are not doing it.”<sup>79</sup> There were some low-income youth who believed that if the government didn’t address their needs, the community might be able to address them (e.g. fixing a road in the area), but the more compelling reality was that their livelihood depended on appropriate government responses. One group of young women were comprised of informal traders. They sold *kenkey*, pig meat, provisions, and cosmetics on the roadside. One of the women expressed their conundrum in these words, “It is with these petty jobs that we get something to feed ourselves, but with the increasing fuel prices, the price of things is always going up, and things are becoming more and more expensive, so I’m pleading with the government to please do something about it for us.”<sup>80</sup>

The differences expressed above, namely, politics as a means of ensuring your place in society (comfort) versus improving one’s life circumstances significantly, continued in the focus group discussions regarding the issues that interested them. All the youth, regardless of religion, gender or income, expressed interest in youth unemployment, education, health, and sanitation, but differences ensued in the description or end goal of these issues related to life circumstances. For example, all participants mentioned concerns about sanitation, but participants in the low-income focus groups talked about the lack of public toilets in their neighborhood, while high income youth lamented the amount of rubbish in Ghana.<sup>81</sup> Health concerns and insufficient infrastructure were also an interest of Ghanaian youth. Youth in high income neighborhoods talked about recent news reports describing Ghanaian hospitals that did not have enough beds for patients. A typical response of the low-income youth, on the other hand, sounded like this: “We have issues with cholera, because we are having flies around and our areas are not kept clean. We are having issues with malaria because we have cans around that are holding water that is breeding mosquitoes...”<sup>82</sup> The interest in health issues was divided by those immediately impacted by lack of infrastructure (cases of malaria and cholera) versus those one step removed (hospital bed shortage).

Education and employment concerns were also represented in ways that illustrated income differentials. The youth in low-income areas described the desire for more educational opportunities. Some had pursued tertiary education but were unemployed and despondent.<sup>83</sup> Youth in high income neighborhoods expressed a frustration that their educational pursuits (all youth in the high-income focus group were in university) could not be more tailored to their passions. “Sometimes in Ghana, we learn irrelevant things... Imagine someone doing visual arts and this person has to do an elective in mathematics or maybe an integrated science that involves chemistry. I don’t think that is fair.”<sup>84</sup> In one focus group of high-income youth, street sellers were described as a problem that the government should stop for the good of the country, “An example is people selling on the bridges or vendors selling on the street. You have the power to drive them away as a president. Some of them might get unemployed, but I think it is a decision that you have to take...citizens will be grateful if foreigners come to the country and see that there are no vendors on the streets.”<sup>85</sup> A decision that this particular young person thought would be good for Ghana—stopping street trading and increasing

unemployment in order to decrease discomfort for foreigners visiting Ghana—involved the livelihood of participants in the low-income focus groups. The main takeaway of the dissonance in responses among focus group participants related to education and employment is that perhaps it is not surprising a citizenship centered around local community and country development for low-income youth will trump a more variegated response that includes law abidance and rights when the former is your deeply lived reality and aspirational goal.

We know that interviewing youth in fourteen focus groups is not sufficient to assess whether class determines attitudes toward citizenship among Ghanaian youth. Still, some broad patterns in the responses related to political engagement appeared. All the youth in these focus groups named the lack of employment opportunities as a core problem in Ghana, coalescing with the pattern on the continent that names unemployment as a key concern.<sup>86</sup> No evidence existed, however, that despondency about unemployment led towards a higher propensity for violence.<sup>87</sup> High income youth, because they had more to lose if the economic or political situation deteriorated, highlighted rights and law abidance in their understanding of citizenship, while low-income youth, because their life circumstances involved the lack of resources, noted citizenship understandings that enveloped improvements to community and country. Finally, youth in low-income areas were less cynical regarding politics than high income youth, an almost counterintuitive finding.

## Conclusion

This article includes a number of intriguing findings. Focus group discussions among this cohort of Ghanaian youth reveal that youth affiliated with mainline and charismatic traditions can articulate religious organizational messaging regarding political engagement, but their own notions of citizenship seem to be informed independently of that religious messaging. Second, infrequent churchgoers are more cognizant of their rights and notions of active citizenship compared with frequent churchgoers. Finally, some of the most engrained attitudes toward citizenship among this cohort of African youth appear to be rooted in class rather than religion.

These findings signify that religious organizations and church elites may not be significant socialization agents informing Ghanaian youth regarding understandings of citizenship and political engagement, although more research involving different groups (e.g., youth in rural areas, Muslim youths) or greater numbers is needed to affirm or disavow this first research finding. Despite the apparent impotence of religious organizations informing notions of citizenship among Ghanaian youth in this study, religious organizations might still be inspired to retool their advantages of influence and social networking beyond public theology messaging to the support of youth empowerment programs that encourage citizen mobilization and inclusive political engagement. Youth empowerment programs are more experiential and could lead to life improvement that would inform more directly youth understandings of citizenship and political engagement compared with public theology rooted actions and messaging.

The findings also expand our understanding of citizenship in that the research has revealed a varied and nuanced understanding of citizenship among Ghanaian youth. Aspects of citizenship related to legalistic (e.g., obligations), participatory (e.g., mobilization), and



communal (e.g., responsibilities) views were articulated by Ghanaian youth whatever their background or identity. Ghanaian youth hold coexisting notions of citizenship, but they appear to be especially cognizant of their responsibilities toward community and nation-state building. In some ways, the dominance of this communal understanding of citizenship among Ghanaian youth is a surprising outcome. Keller explains that the liberal concept of citizenship has had a lasting legacy in places like Ghana colonized by European powers as colonial authorities defined citizenship as those who identified with and belonged to the Western embodiment of a nation-state.<sup>88</sup> Africans didn't become citizens until independence, or so the narrative goes. This Eurocentric desire to belong to a nation-state as an individual who can participate in civic affairs and voice his/her opinion on politics gets repeated on the continent today in everything from surveys that query citizens about their formal political rights to civic education programs in schools.<sup>89</sup> One might expect African youth, then, to naturally replicate liberal definitions of citizenship in focus group discussions. Yet the opposite occurred as Ghanaian youth were more prone to communal understandings of citizenship that suggests a pushback to neocolonial narratives of belonging.

Finally, these research outcomes affirm the more recent findings related to political engagement, namely, African youth, while marginalized, are not necessarily "waiting in limbo for a better tomorrow."<sup>90</sup> African youth associated with these focus groups, whether low or high income, male or female, religious or nonreligious, have not given up hope for their country. They were business leaders, community developers, or integrally connected with the informal economy, and many found solace in social networks within their communities, extended families, or churches. Nevertheless, these youth, particularly those in low-income neighborhoods, expressed genuine despair when basic needs (sanitation, employment, food) were not readily available or hard to attain. There was a desire for politicians to root out corruption and pass policies that would improve infrastructure and increase employment opportunities. It is imperative, then, that African governments, in a situation of continued growth in the youth demographic and challenging economic environments, respond with policies aimed at labor intensive structural transformational, youth empowerment, and holistic community development.

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## Notes

1 Mpungose and Monyae 2018.

2 Resnick and Thurlow 2015, p. 1.

3 See Resnick and Thurlow 2015; Sommers 2015.

4 To begin an exploration of scholarship on religion and politics in Africa, see Dowd 2015; Gifford 2015; Kuperus 2018.

5 Related mainly to budgetary and time constraints, we focused on the role that Christianity plays regarding shaping youth understandings of citizenship and political engagement. Christianity is the dominant religious expression in Ghana, but an exhaustive study on this topic would include indigenous and Islamic religious networks for additional comparative insights.

6 Ghana World Factbook 2017.

7 Afrobarometer 2017; Gallup International 2000.

8 See Ghana Catholic Bishops 2017; Kuperus 2018; Quayesi-Amakye 2014.

9 Cheeseman et al. 2017; Osei-Assibey 2014.

10 Gifford 1998, pp. 57–111; Kuperus 2018.

11 Ghana Demographics Profile 2018; Asante 2006, p. 222.

12 Van Gyampo 2015, p. 69. For work exploring the role Ghanaian youth played in Ghana's independence, see Asante 2006 and van Gyampo 2012.

13 See National Youth Policy 2010; van Gyampo 2015.

14 Hoetu 2011.

15 To clarify terminology, mainline Protestant churches such as Methodists, Anglicans, and Presbyterians were introduced to the African continent by the colonial missionaries. The Roman Catholic church also permeated the continent in this period. In this paper, we adopt the concept of mainline to refer to religious traditions introduced by colonial missionaries beginning mainly in the late 1800s. The Pentecostal, charismatic, and evangelical traditions are exceptionally diverse. Ideally,

- our research would have delineated these different Christian traditions in both the elite interviews and focus groups, but we combined them into the category of ‘charismatic’ to represent Christian traditions that recognize the role of the Holy Spirit, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, personal piety, or the centrality of evangelism.
- 16 Enhancing Youth 2013.
- 17 Asante 2006; Sommers 2015.
- 18 Gavin 2007; Honwana 2013.
- 19 Asante 2006; Bob-Milliar 2014; Sommers 2015; Zoettl 2016.
- 20 Sommers 2015, p. xii; Resnick and Thurlow 2015, p. 173.
- 21 See Branch and Mamphilly 2015; Cheeseman 2015; Kagwanja 2005; Njamnjoh 2016; Obed 2018; Thieme 2013.
- 22 Branch and Mamphilly 2015; Lambert 2016; Mueller 2018.
- 23 Lekalake and Gyimah-Boadi 2016. See also Dawson 2014; Oyedemi and Mahlatji 2016.
- 24 As to the “absolute level performance” see Resnick and Thurlow 2015, p. 10.
- 25 For “the rapid increase in Christian adherents in Africa,” see Pew Research Center 2010.
- 26 See Cheeseman 2015, pp. 73-82.
- 27 Kuperus 2011, p. 279. See also Gifford 1998; McCauley 2012.
- 28 Patterson and Kuperus 2016. See also McClendon and Riedl 2019; Longman 2010; McCauley 2014; Ranger 2008.
- 29 McClendon and Riedl 2015; Patterson and Kuperus 2016.
- 30 What follows are the broad patterns of charismatic and mainline public theology. Exceptions to these patterns certainly exist. One can find examples of prophetic charismatic churches (e.g. Apostolic Faith Mission in South Africa during the apartheid years) and status quo mainline churches (e.g. the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa during the apartheid years). Moreover, charismatic religious messaging and worship styles have significant reach into mainline churches.
- 31 Burgess 2015; McClendon and Riedl 2019.
- 32 Burgess 2015; McClendon and Riedl 2019; Quayesi-Amakye 2014.
- 33 Gifford 2015; Lonsdale 2009.
- 34 Halisi et al. 2002; Kaiser and Ndegwa 1998; Keller 2014; Thompson et al. 2018.
- 35 Branch and Mamphilly 2015; Mamdani 1996; Nyamnjoh 2016.
- 36 The liberal view of citizenship holds that rational, self-interested individuals hold certain rights granted by the states. Legalistic citizenship is a passive identity; one understands citizenship as a set of legal “do’s” and “don’ts” — obey the law, pay taxes, vote, etc. The participatory view of citizenship — often linked with liberalism — holds that individuals work in concert with others to secure rights, foster change, and uphold community obligations. This understanding of citizenship is more activist. Finally, the communal (local or national) notion of citizenship stresses that a person’s identity is bound up with others. Communal understandings of citizenship stress responsibilities over rights — responsibilities within the context of one’s local

- community or toward the wider nation-state. Carrying out these responsibilities builds your community and/or country.
- 37 Anquandah 2009; Gifford 1998, pp. 57-111.
- 38 Kuperus 2018.
- 39 Van Gyampo and Asare 2017.
- 40 Interview, Osu, 26 June 2018.
- 41 Interview, Legon, 25 June 2018.
- 42 Gifford 1998, p. 87; Quayesi-Amakye 2014.
- 43 Quayesi-Amakye 2014, p. 656.
- 44 Quayesi-Amakye 2018.
- 45 Interview, Accra, 5 July 2018.
- 46 Interview, Adenta, 28 June 2018.
- 47 Focus Group Discussion (FGD) 9, infrequent church-attending men, Pantang, 23 June 2018.
- 48 FGD 11, infrequent church-attending men, Bgawa Mallam, 21 June 2018.
- 49 FGD 13, infrequent church-attending men, Legon, 24 June 2018.
- 50 FGD 2, frequent church-attending women, mainline, Pantang, 18 June 2018.
- 51 FGD 3, frequent church-attending men, charismatic, Pantang, 23 June 2018.
- 52 FGD 6, frequent church-attending mixed, mainline, Legon, 24 June 2018.
- 53 FGD 8, infrequent church-attending women, Pantang, 18 June 2018.
- 54 FGD 9, infrequent church-attending men, Pantang, 23 June 2018.
- 55 FGD 2, frequent church-attending women, mainline, Pantang, 18 June 2018 and FGD 10, infrequent church-attending women, Pantang, 23 June 2018.
- 56 FGD 6, frequent church-attending mixed, mainline, Legon, 24 June 2018.
- 57 Halisi et al. 1998.
- 58 To explore the continuation of economic-based neocolonialism, see Bush 2007; Brooks 2017.
- 59 FGD 1, frequent church-attending men, mainline, Pantang, June 18, 2018.
- 60 The former was evident in FGD group 7, infrequent church-attending men, Pantang, 18 June 2018; and FGD 10, infrequent church-attending women, Pantang, 23 June 2018.
- 61 It should also be noted that the frequency of 'participation' and 'rights' oriented responses in the infrequent youth column could be skewed higher due to a high number of community activists in one of the focus groups, namely, FGD 13.
- 62 FGD 1 (Presbyterian); FGD 2 (Presbyterian); FGD 4 (Charismatic).
- 63 FGD 3, frequent church-attending men, charismatic, Pantang, 23 June 2018.
- 64 FGD 3, frequent church-attending men, charismatic, Pantang, 23 June 2018.
- 65 FGD 5 frequent church-attending mixed, charismatic, Legon, June 24, 2018.
- 66 FGD 2, frequent church-attending women, mainline, Pantang, 18 June 2018.
- 67 FGD 6, frequent church-attending mixed, mainline, Legon, 24 June 2018.
- 68 Andolina et al. 2003; Asante 2013; Chazan 1978. The results from these focus groups, interestingly, line up with Djupe and Gilbert's work (2012) that suggests political



messaging from religious organizations/churches may be cohesive but that individuals process or embody that information differently depending on context, motivation, or status within a church/religious organization.

- 69 Arthur 2009; Mazrui 1971; Taylor 2017. To be fair, some of the socio-political messaging from mainline denominations stresses this narrative as well.
- 70 Esau & Roman 2015; Jennings 1974.
- 71 FGD 11, infrequent church-attending men, Bgawa Mallam, 21 June 2018; FGD 6, frequent church-attending mixed, mainline, Legon, 24 June 2018.
- 72 FGD 13, infrequent church-attending men, Legon, 24 June 2018.
- 73 FGD 14, infrequent church-attending women, Legon, 28 June 2018.
- 74 FGD 8, infrequent church-attending women, Pantang, 18 June 2018.
- 75 FGD 1, frequent church-attending men, mainline, Pantang, June 18, 2018.
- 76 FGD 2, frequent church-attending women, mainline, Pantang, 18 June 2018.
- 77 Observations based on FGD 11, infrequent church-attending men, Bgawa Mallam, 21 June 2018; FGD 12, infrequent church-attending women, Bgawa Mallam, 21 June 2018; FGD 14, infrequent church-attending women, Legon, 28 June 2018.
- 78 FGD 5, frequent church-attending mixed, charismatic, Legon, 24 June 2018.
- 79 FGD 3, frequent church-attending men, charismatic, Pantang, 23 June 2018.
- 80 FGD 10, infrequent church-attending women, Pantang, 23 June 2018.
- 81 Contrast evident in FGD 9, infrequent church-attending men, Pantang, 23 June 2018; and FGD 5, frequent church-attending mixed, charismatic, Legon, 24 June 2018.
- 82 FGD 3, frequent church-attending men, charismatic, Pantang, 23 June 2018.
- 83 FGD 2, frequent church-attending women, mainline, Pantang, 18 June 2018.
- 84 FGD 11, infrequent church-attending men, Bgawa Mallam, 21 June 2018.
- 85 FGD 11, infrequent church-attending men, Bgawa Mallam, 21 June 2018.
- 86 Resnick and Thurlow 2015, p. 5.
- 87 Honwana 2013; Urdal 2006.
- 88 Keller 2014, pp. 18-27; Mamdani 1996.
- 89 See Bratton 2013; Abudu and Fuseini 2014.
- 90 Resnick and Thurlow 2015, p. 173.