

## **[Description for the general public]**

### **Between Marginalisation and Empowerment Women in African Catholicism (the case of Ghana)**

Focussing on the example of Ghana – as a religiously and ethnically complex sub-Saharan country with relatively stable economic and political situation – this project seeks to study African Catholic women and their entangled ethnic and religious identities in the context of gender. It seems that the position of African women, who identify themselves as Catholics, is full of ambiguities, contradictions and tensions that relate to the twofold processes of marginalisation and empowerment. What does it mean to be a woman and an African and a Catholic at the same time in the contemporary world? Which elements of this complex identity bring empowerment and give voice to African Catholic women and which lead to their marginalization and lack of independence? How do African Catholic women situate themselves in relation to post-colonial re-invented African indigenous identities, post-missionary Catholicism, globalized institution and the patriarchal hierarchy and structure of the Roman Catholic Church?

In asking these questions, I draw on the anthropological concepts of ‘lived religion’ (religion as lived and experienced by people on an everyday basis, influencing and shaping their lives and biographies ‘on the ground’), as well as the concept of identity as a construct (i.e. something that is constantly shaped, reshaped and negotiated through personal choices and emotions as well as social, cultural and political forces). This approach means that I will focus not only on the institutional level and official declarations but also on personal stories, individual biographies, the practical level of religion and the identity formation of today’s African female Catholics. To achieve this, I will conduct ethnographic fieldwork in Ghana in different locations. These places vary in terms of the religious, ethnic and economic conditions that influence gender roles differently (a big capital city in southern Ghana, a medium town in central Ghana and a provincial location in the north).

Anthropological studies on African Catholics and their religious practices are still underdeveloped compared with the wave of scholarly interest in Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal Christianity. Yet Africa contains the world’s most rapidly growing Catholic population; by 2025 one-sixth of the world’s Catholic population is predicted to be African. Both the numerical dominance of females in African Catholicism and their active involvement in parish life and less formal Catholic communities (often promoting charismatic and ‘pentecostalised’ spirituality) raise questions about possible tensions between the personal and communal empowerment that women seem to develop as Catholics in Africa, on the one hand, and the hierarchical, male oriented structure of the Roman Catholic Church and its understanding of the female role, on the other. This issue is very important at a time of significant change within global Christianity, especially associated with the rapid growth of Pentecostalism, the growing development and strength of the ‘global South’ and inter-continental migration.

This project aims to produce tangible results within a traditional academic framework through a series of scholarly publications in Polish and English. The project will also use media appearances and open lectures dedicated to the general public in order to promote knowledge about contemporary Africa and encourage debate concerning Christianity and Catholicism and their role in the formation of gender identities, the role of Churches in inter-continental dialogue, as well as the relation between global Christianity and cultural encounters.