

**Ekaterina V. Shakhbazyan**  
**Russian State University**  
**for the Humanities**  
**Moscow**

**Africans in Moscow: Foreign Churches as a Factor  
of Socio-cultural Adaptation or non-Adaptation**

**Introduction**

The paper is based on the field evidence collected in 2007 and 2008. We gathered and analyzed the interviews with the migrants from Angola, Ghana, Democratic Republic of Congo (Zaire), Cameroon, Nigeria, Ethiopia. For our research, we composed a questionnaire in Russian and English languages and asked members of different religious community to fill out it. We also used the methods of observation and informal conversation. In spite of the fact that the present research is limited to Moscow, the capital of Russia, we believe that, probably with some minor reservations, the situation in Moscow can expose vividly the specific features of the adaptation process and problems of the overwhelming majority of African migrants to Russia, as Moscow and some other megapoleis is the place where they are mostly concentrated.

Among the great variety of factors that influence the migrants' socio-cultural adaptation process (educational and professional background, language skills, family status, financial position, interrelation with the accepting socio-cultural milieu, etc.), the factor of religion stands prominently. This factor includes not only the role the beliefs are playing but also the possibilities for performing the religious cult in the host country and the part religious organizations (Churches in the case of Christians) play as a means of the migrants' integration in the Russian society and co-operation with each other.

In the recent migration studies and researches into the sociology of religion, scholars have been paying attention to the important role of the Church in the diaspora's life. Undoubtedly, religious life is not separated from other parts of peoples' life but is interlocked and overlapped with them. Indeed, the local branch of a Church is most likely one of the ports of call for new migrants. From there, new social and economic networks can develop. In addition to ideas and contacts, Churches may provide security in countries where racial prejudice can make the lives of Africans uncomfortable or even dangerous (Mohan and Zack-Williams, 2002). The Church in the diaspora continues to act both as a mechanism for socializing the new migrant to his/her new environment, as well as maintaining contact with the home country (Ibid.).

Religion and its institutions can play different roles in the interaction of the migrants' community and host society. In some cases, the religious organizations help the migrant to adapt, inculcate in him / her the patterns of behavior accepted in host society, integrate him / her in the new socio-cultural environment, and promote the establishment of new social connections. In the new cultural milieu the migrant tends to recreate social bonds since his / her past socio-cultural solidarity is broken by uprooting from the original environment. The religious community is one of the fruitful fields for such attempts. As considered, the involvement of new migrants in the network community and his / her social capital are the basis of individual success and the whole community's well-being. In other cases, religion can act as a factor that differentiates local residents against newcomers what creates additional obstacles by cultivating distinctions (cultural, racial, etc.) (Frigerio, 2002). Besides, through the international religious connections the diasporic links can be established.

### **A Brief Description of the African Communities in Russia**

The numerous African communities in Russia in general and Moscow in particular is a recent social phenomenon. Indeed, there were isolated instances of Africans in Russia yet long ago (Blakely, 1986; Golden-Hanga, 1966), but they were accidental, chaotic or temporal (students). After the collapse of the USSR in 1991, the situation changed radically.

Firstly, it became possible to stay in Russia after graduating from a university, secondly, an almost uncontrollable influx of migrants from Africa begun, - that was impossible during the Soviet time, and thirdly, a part of those Soviet graduates returned due to various reasons. As a result, a sudden increase in the number of “non-student” Africans in Moscow happened. At the same time, the reverse process was taking place: the number of students from African countries decreased dramatically. So, students who completely dominated in the social composition of Africans in Russia earlier, lost that position.

Based on information from various informal sources, we can only approximately estimate the number of the African migrants in Moscow as from two up to three thousand people. Unfortunately, there is no appropriate system for taking stock of all the types of migrants in Russia.

Although there exists several African communities based on the country of origin in Moscow, only the Nigerian community has an official legal status. We have also information about the unofficial Ethiopian, Angolan, Namibian, Cameroonian, Ghanaian and Beninese migrant associations. The new migrants, either in attempts to move to the West or to settle in Russia, make use of the contacts with these communities. The matters they approach the communities for vary, depending particularly upon the legality or illegality of the migrants' status. For some migrants applying at, or initiating of official organizations is impossible, given

their illegal status in Russia, and they are forced to rely on more informal contacts such as individual and family connections, kinship relations, ethnic affiliation, religious grouping. At the same time, the group identity and ‘social capital’ (Portes and Jensen, 1987) are forming to secure economic and social well being, in response to the hostile treatment by some members of the host society among other factors.

The African communities in Russia experience hostility from some of their hosts, based on firm beliefs in difference between them, which can be demoralizing and dangerous. This hostility may force the Africans to draw on each other and take advantage of shared meanings, which then becomes a source of spiritual strength and competitive advantage. Basically, such close connections between community members may generate and strengthen the tendency to cluster in ‘enclaves’. However, this process of concentration is not the result of cultural closeness only, but as a rule is influenced by other important factors such as difficulties in finding of, and paying for an appropriate flat, uncertainty in self security, sometimes the illegal status of the individuals, etc.

Hence, to a considerable degree ‘the very existence and density of ethnic networks is affected by the hostility of the host society’ (Mohan and Zack-Williams, 2002). However, we argue that the Church and religious community are playing not the same role in the lives of the migrants with different status.

### **The Roles of the Church and Religious Community in the Migrant’s Life**

We tried to examine the role of the foreign Churches to which the majority of the African Christians living in Moscow belong. As it was found out, the religious belonging made no impact on the migrants’ choice of the country of residence. A respondent was asked to mark in the questionnaire several important points that had influenced his / her opinion on this or that country’s desirability for migration.

Among other options, there was “the main religion of the country” but only less than 4 % of the respondents chose it.

A new African migrant, as a rule, starts to visit a church from the very beginning of his / her stay in Moscow. There are several reasons for it. Firstly, he / she continues to perform an habitual ritual, which gives the feeling of confidence. Secondly, it is not necessary to be competent in the Russian language for participating in church service, since it is held in one of the languages the migrant speaks or at least understands well (English, French, Portuguese, Spanish). Probably, for the last reason, respondents from Ethiopia argue that in their opinion, churches do not play any role in adaptation. Whereas these respondents are Orthodox Christians, they visit Russian churches, where services are carried out in Russian. Obviously, new migrants from Ethiopia without knowledge of the language cannot leave the social vacuum and they are forced to seek the opportunity in other fields. Thirdly, there are charity centers at some foreign churches, which give financial and other support to migrants with low income (for example, distribution of food once a week). The working languages in this centre are English and French. However, the reasons for their visiting churches depend on the legal / illegal status of a migrant, his / her spiritual needs, the time of stay in Moscow.

As all the respondents marked, there are no serious obstacles for practicing religion in Moscow, except the problem of placement. Not all religious communities have a permanent location for prayer service, therefore the address for church services changes often what creates some difficulties to those who do not have contacts with the community's leader and cannot keep track of information about frequent crossings. 55 % of our respondents prefer to visit the same church and 45 % answered that it depends on circumstances. However, regardless this fact, 33 % of the respondents marked that know by name and communicate with more than 10

parishioners in the religious communities they visit, 40 % know from 5 to 10 persons and 27 % have less than 5 acquaintances. 73 % of the respondents reported about mutual aid in the religious community.

The religious community is an important part of the social life of Africans in Moscow. To understand its role in the migrants' integration in the new cultural environment, it is important to realize to what degree these communities promote conduction and keeping Russian culture, impart new patterns of social behavior and give the opportunity to construct personal relations in the host society. According to our research, foreign Churches in Moscow provide African migrants with the feeling of security, stability, and reproduce values of their own culture but that is not to say these organizations promote the migrant's involvement in the new culture and co operation with its bearers. As we consider, the true possibilities a religious organization possesses in Russia is an important factor that determines the direction in which the migrants' social integration is taking place. If the religious community turns out able to meet all the person's basic social needs (help with renting a flat, getting a job, etc.), a migrant may not have enough stimuli to establish firm links with the accepting society and its members. Thus, the strength of the religious community can serve as an obstacle for his / her successful integration in the Russian society. The same role can be played by well-established migrant communities based on the principle of their members' common national origin.

## **Conclusions**

So, our research shows that in Moscow foreign Churches on the one hand, promote their African adepts' keeping of their original identities (not religious only but socio-cultural in general as well) what can give them the feeling of psychological comfort, while on the other hand they can move the migrants further away from the norms and values accepted in the Russian society, thus complicating the process of

their adaptation. However, the direction of migrant's integration depends on his status. The newcomers in the greater measure are attached to the religious community which can provide them with social, spiritual and financial support. The areas when the new migrant (or illegal) is able to create personal relations are confined, since the role of the religious community in his social life is significant. For the migrants who have been living in Russia for a long time this statement concerns to a lesser degree.

We argue that religious community promotes social boundaries within the migrant's milieu. Interestingly that the ethnic affiliation in the religious sphere of migrant's life is feebly appeared. The members of religious community in a church prefer to communicate with people who understand their language.

## References

- Blakely, 1986** – Blakely A., 1986. *Russia and the Negro: Blacks in Russian History and Thought*. Washington DC: Howard University Press.
- Frigerio, 2002** – Frigerio A., 2002. *Outside the Nation, outside the Diaspora: Accommodating Race and Religion in Argentina*. *Sociology of Religion*, Vol. 63: 291-315.
- Golden-Hanga, 1966** – Golden-Hanga L., 1966. *Africans in Russia*. Moscow: Novosti Press Agency.
- Mohan and Zack-Williams, 2002** – Mohan G and Zack-Williams A.B., 2002 *Globalization from below: Conceptualizing the Role of the African Diaspora in Africa's Development*. *Review of African Political Economy*, Vol.29: 211-236.
- Portes and Jensen, 1987** – Portes A and Jensen L. *What's an ethnic enclave? The case for conceptual clarity*. *American Sociology Review*, Vol. 52: 768-771.