



AFRICA IN MOVIMENTO / AFRICA ON THE MOVE

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**TITLE: TRANSCRIBING ANCESTORS IN DIASPORA:
GHANAIAN NAMING PRACTICES IN THE UNITED STATES**

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ABSTRACT:

Names and naming safeguard existential order and coherence among the multiple ethnic groups in Ghana. A person's name is deemed as the most significant marker of identity, as well as the source of power, character and spirit. As complex, elaborate and multi dimensional beings, humans acquire several names to represent their various qualities. Traditionally, children were often named after their grandparents or ancestors either to let the deceased re-inhabit the places they left behind or to honor their presence in the world of the living. With exponential growth of Christianity in Ghana the traditional importance of naming has been waning; however, naming practices have acquired a novel meaning in the modern context. This paper focuses on Ghanaian naming practices, and specifically, on the significance of grandparents' names, in the context of diaspora. I argue that this particular custom carries three distinct meanings for Ghanaian immigrants in the United States - transnational networking, community building and cultural/moral coaching. In terms of networking, it serves as the means to reinforce and mobilize the 'social capital' back home, to maintain long-established relationships and preserve Ghanaian traditions. Furthermore, by 'transporting' the past to the present, and through the collection and organization of memories, Ghanaian immigrants actively counter their feeling of displacement and 'domesticate' new spaces. Finally, by employing family names, parents struggle to reclaim and coach their American-born children whom they see as partial strangers. A child's name, which always comes with a 'bundle' of memories, traditions and meanings from the past, emphasizes her communal belonging. The argument is based on several key theories in diaspora and transnational studies and is corroborated through my conversations with the parish of the International Central Gospel Church in the greater Boston area.

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