

# Planting Islam in Ghana: A Critical Review of the Approaches

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## Abstract

The unique features that a missionary religious tradition exhibits in the receiving land cannot be fully understood until the methods involved in its planting are critically scrutinized. This essay examines the various approaches which have played a crucial role in the planting of Islam in Ghana. Muslim agents during the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries started the dissemination of Islam with a largely effective accommodating, flexible approach and attitude to traditional culture and life. Later, certain Islamic elements introduced puritan, reformist approaches with the view of cleansing Islam of ‘perceived’ indigenous influences. By means of information derived from historico-theological methods, the essay concludes that indigenous Ghanaian life has played a significant role in molding and shaping Islamic beliefs and practices into their unique forms as they are in Ghana today.

**Keywords:** Islam, West Africa, Ghana, indigenous culture, reformist, Muslims

## Introduction

Any attempt to study the practice of Islam in Ghana without an appreciation of the strategies of its planting falls short of expectation. This is because Islam in Ghana is what it is now because of how it has been planted since its arrival. Ghana is a modern-day country, which was previously called the Gold Coast. It is a West African country, bordered to the west by Cote D’Ivoire, to the north by Burkina Faso, Togo to the east, and the Gulf of

Guinea to the south. On March 6, 1957, when the country gained independence, the name ‘Gold Coast’ was changed to Ghana.

Islam was first introduced to Ghana by Muslims of Dyula and Mande speaking descents who moved downwards from the Western Sudan into the Volta Basin and the Gold Coast (present-day Ghana) (Dumbe 2013:21). Most of the Dyula people were Muslim merchants, who also planted Islam alongside their trading mainly in gold dust and kola nut during the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries (Sanneh 1997:65; Dumbe 2013:10). Others were also Muslim clerics who engaged in various spiritual activities including the divination for spiritual protection against enemies and for other spiritual powers. There were also professional travelers whose keen interest was to explore beyond the frontiers of their local environment. Ethnically, Muslim agents were mainly Yarse and Wangara people of the Soninké of the Sahel-Sudan region who moved down south into Northern Ghana (Pontzen 2021:19; cf. Wilks 2000:94). Their exceptional skills in trading made the Muslims economically and politically powerful in states like Gonja, Wa, and Dagomba. Some of the Muslims moved further south upon invitation of the rulers of Bono and Asante (Levtzion 1968:45-47; Triaud 2014:11). The Muslim travelers and merchants did not only go south to trade gold metals and kola nuts (which were abundant in the Akan-forest areas), but they also carried Islamic ideas back from the Niger Delta to Bono and later to Asante. The expertise of the Muslims made them contribute not only to the establishment of towns but they were also political advisers in towns like Gonja, Dagomba, Wala, Banda, and Mamprussi (Goody 1968:67; Pontzen 2021:56).

In this article, I will discuss the two main approaches employed by Dyula Muslims as they Islamized Ghana. First, I will examine the progressive and accommodating approaches which were employed by Dyula Muslims in the planting and spreading of Islam in Ghana. As mainly *ṣūfīs* of various traditions of Islam, Dyula Muslims focused more on spirituality than accurate Islamic legal principles (Levtzion 1968:102; Sanneh 1997:23; Ryan 1998: 150-151; Ware 2014:78; Nobili 2020:327). Their less strict Islamic practices and positive attitudes towards the indigenous way of life helped to endear Islam to many. The Dyula Muslims, eventually, established a form of Islam in Ghana which resonated with the indigenous people’s worldview.

Furthermore, I will also examine small sections of the Dyula Muslims who adopted unaccommodating approaches to planting Islam (Triaud 2014:14). They were Muslim agents who demanded the practice of Islam de-

void of indigenous influences. They preached and practiced Islam which was strict and legalistic and which demanded a sudden break with the old indigenous religions (Hiskett 1984:69; Ryan 1998:150). This legalistic approach, grounded on high Islamic ideals, accompanied the pragmatic and effective Dyula tradition in the Islamization process. The champions of the strict Islamic practices, often referred to as revivalists or reformists, adopted and still adopt uncompromising attitudes to indigenous life and culture (Hiskett 1984: 69; Ware 2014:67; Nobili 2020:333). These agents set out to rid Islam of indigenous cultural influences which they claimed were corrupting and compromising the religion in the country.

Some sections of this article form part of the research conducted by this author in 2010 and continued from September 2021 to October 2022. Through historico-theological methods based mainly on the critical study of theological positions of Muslim groups in Ghana and how these positions have facilitated the planting of Islam over time from books on Islam in Ghana and conference materials of various Muslim sects and organizations, the essay examines the impact of the various approaches in the Islamization process and the critical role of indigenous religions and culture in shaping Islam in Ghana.

### **Accommodating Attitudes and the Planting of Islam: Attempt at Indigenization**

The Dyula are the Mande speaking people who inhabited the Western Sudan, the Volta Basin, and the Gold Coast (present-day Ghana). They were largely traders (the term ‘Dyula’ can be translated with *traders*) who were also considered the most successful agents of Islamization of Western Sudan (Ryan 1998:152). In his groundbreaking book, *Islam in West Africa*, Trimmingham (1966) identifies three features which contributed to the success of the Dyula people as Muslim agents. First, the Dyula largely prioritized spirituality over and above accurate knowledge of Islamic philosophy, theology, and jurisprudence as necessary for the practice of Islam (Trimingham 1959:45). Thus, they were not trained missionaries in Islamic theology. Second, Mauro Nobili is correct, stating that the transmitters of the Islamic faith were not foreigners but indigenes (Black people) of Western Sudan with significant knowledge of the religious worldview and culture of the native people (Nobili 2020:331).

Third, the humble and unassuming nature of the Dyula Muslims facilitated their embrace of the local traditions and cultures when necessary (Trimingham 1959:47; Ryan 1998:153). Trimingham, Levtzion, Clarke, and later Ryan conclude that these three features of the Dyula people were instrumental in the success of the accommodating approach they championed as agents of the Islamic religion in Ghana. It must be noted that the popularity of the accommodating approach was not only because of the unique features of the Muslim Dyula agents but also because it was a missionary strategy which the indigenous/native people were comfortable with.

Upon their arrival, the Dyula Muslims were confronted with the entrenched indigenous culture of the people. At the very heart of the culture was an indigenous religion which, at the time, captured the essence of their worldview and gave meaning to all social and political structures (Ryan 1998:152; Ware 2014:85). As a strategy, the Dyula Muslims did not demand a drastic or sudden change of indigenous religion for Islam (Levtzion 1968:108; Trimingham 1959:89; Pontzen 2021:56). They were gradual, quietist, and pacific in their attitude which involved intermingling with the native people to the extent of integrating and contributing immensely to their indigenous society (Levtzion 1968:108; Triaud 2014:3-4; Pontzen 2021:56).

This Dyula participation in the indigenous life took place on individual level and on a daily basis in homes, recreational, public, and religious/sacred places. They traded and intermarried with the local folks and took part in some of the indigenous ceremonies such as naming, burial, and pouring of libations to ancestral spirits and deities (Trimingham 1959:56; Ryan 1998:154; Pontzen 2021:59). While agreeing with Trimingham on the role of Muslim traders in the planting and spread of Islam in West Africa, Nobili acknowledges the critical role of Muslim communities (Nobili 2020:338). Religious scholars and clerics of local Muslim communities were instrumental in the religious education and spiritual formation of local converts to Islam up till the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (Ware 2014:85; Nobili 2020:334). In particular, Lamin Sanneh mentions the contribution of pacific clerics to the Islamic diffusion in West Africa and Ghana. Sanneh (1976:49) identifies three groups of Muslim clerics: 1) Soninké clerics who eventually became the face of Islam and the Islamic image alongside an increasing identification with the Manding culture; 2) the followers of Al-Hājj Salim (floruit 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> century) who founded a somehow ascetic clerical vocation for missionary escapades; and 3) the Jakhanké clerics who were connected to numerous centers

in an effective network of the clerical expansion of many outreach programs for da'wa (Sanneh 1976:49).

On a commercial level, Dyula Muslims preferred trading with indigenous Muslim partners, which was also instrumental in the rapid conversion and spread of Islam in Northern Ghana (Wilks 2000:105). At the royal courts, Muslims served as royal interpreters, officials in charge of the treasury of the rulers, and even helped run the courts on behalf of the royal families (Ware 2014:86; Nobili 2020:335). In his book, *West Africa and Islam: A study of religious development from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century*, Peter Clarke acknowledges the immense contribution of Muslims to the Gonja royal court in two main ways (Clarke 1982:89). First, the Muslims offered expertise in military warfare in an era when conquests of new territories were highly priced. Second, they also helped to provide effective and efficient administration, especially in recording the history of the kingdoms. In these two main ways, Clarke observes, Muslims contributed greatly to strengthening the authority of the rulers (Clarke 1982:89) and influenced socio-political structures of the Northern part of Ghana (Wilks 1980:153; Dumba 2013:7; Pontzen 2021:69).

The impact of the Dyula active engagement was also felt, particularly in Dagomba where Muslims are on record for supporting Na Zangina (the local ruler) to defend the state against persistent Gonja attacks (Clarke 1982:67; Braimah 1997:19-20; Ryan 1998:154). Clarke also notes that in Dagomba the Muslims kept a record of a formal list of past chiefs and *imams* and their periods of reign. With time, the Muslims became so close to the Dagomba royal families that they were eventually incorporated in them. The Asante kingdom also had its share of Muslim influence (Clarke 1982:67). The political and military impact of Muslims were felt in Kumasi, the capital of the Asante kingdom. Muslims were political and military advisers to Asantehene, the king (Braimah 1997:19-23; Pontzen 2021:71).

The influence of Muslims in Asante reached its height during the reign of Nana Osei Kwame (1777-1803). The Asantehene is reported to have recruited Muslim religious scholars into the royal family (*gyaasewa*) mainly to render spiritual services (Pontzen 2021:20). He not only permitted Muslims to take charge of the trade in gold, kola, salt, and slaves, but also secured the position of sole-traders in the cattle business (Wilks 2000:94-95; Pontzen 2021:21). Among the Dyula Muslims were also mystic healers, astrologers, and political agents who introduced sound political systems and commerce for the rulers of states (Hiskett 1984:58; Wilks 2000:103).

This flexible and accommodating attitude of the Dyula Muslims to the indigenous religions and culture could in general be effective as far as the planting and the spread of Islam was concerned, especially in Northern Ghana (Trimingham 1959:45; Triaud 2014:7; Sanneh 2016:43). Its strength was in not demanding a sudden fundamental break with the old indigenous religion and its culture. In other words, conversion was not expected to be drastic but it was to involve gradual acceptance of the new religion. The accommodating attitude was also grounded on the notion that change does not take place by a wholesale demonization of the values of the other (Triaud 2014:8; Sanneh 2016:45). Instead, change comes gradually and as a result of the presentation to the natives, in a peaceful manner and without force – these are the positive values of Islam.

Significantly, the Dyula Muslims offered three assets of Islam: First, the spiritual elements such as the ritual prayers, the Hajj (pilgrimage), the Ramadan fast, the Qur'an, and the *ahadith*; Second, simple burial and marriage ceremonies as other primary and essential elements of Islam; many Islamic elements such as polygamy, divorce, and inheritance were regarded by the natives as having a lot in common with indigenous customary laws; and third, lay ministers (*imams*) who, in many ways, were easily accessible to the natives (Trimingham 1959:19; Reindorf 1966:166; Hiskett 1984:67). Consequently, while Muslim scholars impacted the royal courts, traders and spiritual teachers were sustaining the Islamization of the natives through propagation and education. However, the Dyula Muslims did not insist on Islamic principles and rituals whenever they went contrary to essential and very popular indigenous practices (Trimingham 1959:23; Reindorf 1966:166; Fage 1969:113).

### ***Favorable Indigenous Responses***

Once the seed of Islam had been sown in Northern Ghana through a largely flexible, accommodating approach, the gradual assimilation of Islamic belief systems followed inevitably over the years. In his book, *Islam in West Africa*, Trimingham (1959:23) identifies three phases in the gradual assimilation of Islamic religion in Northern Ghana and West Africa which are not only confirmed by scholars like Reindorf (1966:166) and Hiskett (1984:67) but also by revisionist findings on Islam in West Africa such as Triaud (2014:6), Nobili (2020:338), and Pontzen (2021:71). First, the preparatory phase which involved the acceptance, merely, of the material culture of Islam: This phase

is visible in the gradual adoption of Islamic elements such as the wearing of the Islamic charm amulets, necklaces, and veils by the indigenous, native people. It was characterized by a gradual collapse of indigenous barriers and some minor acceptances of religious elements of Islam such as prayer rituals and spiritual assistance. At that stage, the attitude of the native people to Islam was not positive but just indifferent (Trimingham 1966:131). The second phase was the stage of conversion led by the rulers and the royal families. It was not only characterized by a gradual break with the old indigenous religion but also an incorporation of major Islamic elements into daily lives. During this stage, the indigenous religion and Islam endured side by side in the community. However, the impending collapse of the indigenous religion could be observed. The third phase, according to Trimingham, was the phase of reinterpretation (Trimingham 1966:139). By this stage, Islam already had completely changed the lives of the individuals and even the community. A belief in the ability of Islamic religious sanctions and spiritual powers to produce results was observed. Individuals began to think, talk, and behave as members of the universal Muslim community (*ummah*). Qur'ān schools trained their children. The old religion and its culture were gradually broken down. Thus, this process was such that the disintegration of the old cultural features and reintegration of the new ones seemed to be very natural.

The accommodating attitudes and the gradual assimilation of Islamic religion contributed a lot to the development of distinct social classes in Northern Ghana which continue to exist even today. Goody (1968:19), Levtzion (1979:54), Hiskett (1984:62), and Triaud (2014:8) identify three different social groupings. First was the *gbanga*, who were made up of the rulers and members of royal families such as the descendants of the Jakpa conquerors who had a close association with the Dyula Muslims. The *gbanga* practiced 'imperfect' or 'adulterated' Islam because as rulers and custodians of culture, they were not ready to do away with their indigenous practices. Second was the *nyamase*, who were the subjects. In every town or village, the *nyamase* were the commoners, who were hardly touched by Islam. They were steeped in their indigenous religions. Third was the class of the Muslims (*karamos*), mainly merchants who were made up of various ethnic groups. This social differentiation depicted the different levels of Islamic embrace which existed in Northern Ghana for a long time until Islam entirely took over the areas. It must be noted that this description of Islamic history in West Africa and even Ghana championed by Trimingham, Levtzion, and

Clarke have been challenged by later scholars not only in terms of the number of works, but also the revisionist findings on Islam in West Africa. They offer that Trimingham's view of Islam in Africa is too simplistic, riddled with colonialist perceptions to create the impression that foreigners planted Islam in West Africa. Nobili, for example, in a 2020 article *Reinterpreting the role of Muslims in the West African middle ages*, offers new theoretical and historiographic insights into the early history of West African Muslim communities (Nobili 2020:332). Nobili argues that historical experiences of Muslim clerical communities – and more generally of West African Muslims during the Middle Ages, and in fact until the 19<sup>th</sup> century – have been silenced by the resilience of the old theory on the 'Islamization' of West Africa, first introduced by Trimingham (Nobili 2020:331-333).

A more serious attempt at planting Islam among the Fante people in Southern Ghana was initiated by Benjamin Sam and Mahdi Appah. These two Fante and Christian (Methodist) converts founded a Muslim community, which came to be referred to as Fante *kramo* (Fante Islam) in 1885 at Ekumfi Ekrawfo in the Central Region (Fisher 1969:128-140; Wilks 1962:20). As a Fante, Sam adopted a flexible and accommodating attitude by incorporating indigenous customs and traditions as well as Christian elements into his practice of Islam (Fisher 1969:128-140).

### ***Unfavorable Indigenous Responses***

Despite the significant success reached in Northern Ghana, the accommodating attitude of Dyula Muslims was not always successful in planting Islam in Southern Ghana. As a result, it is impossible to find the three-stage process of assimilation of Islamic traditions applicable in the Bono and Asante, as well as other states in the south (Bari 2014:96). The Muslim influence was initially felt in the Asante and Bono kingdoms. Besides serving at the royal courts, the Dyula Muslims 'could preach and teach Islam' and introduce Islamic elements to the Asante (Clarke 1982:107). Attempts were made by the Muslims to change some of the un-Islamic rituals of libation and ancestral stool (Clarke 1982:107). Rulers solicited for Islamic prayers to complement indigenous rituals of the Asante and Bono people. Rulers could be seen wearing Islamic amulets for spiritual support. According to Sheik Osman Bari, Malam Buakari rendered spiritual services to the Asantehene (Bari 2014:98). However, the status of Muslims in Asante deteriorated eventually. The growing influence of Islam was a source of anxiety for the Asante people. Asante-



hene Osei Kwame, who was considered a Muslim believer at heart, was eventually destooled (Clarke 1982:108). It must be noted that, in general, the Bono and Asante just abhorred Islam and its new culture. Although the Bono and Asante immensely benefited from the Dyula Muslims they were not ready to replace their beliefs, customs, and time-tested religion with Islam (Clarke 1982:109).

Like the Bono and Asante states, the Muslim agents received unfavorable responses in other southern towns, and so kept to themselves at the zangos (Muslim quarters). These Muslims in the south are largely the descendants of groups resettled in Ghana with the abolition of the slave trade (Debrunner 1967:62; Adu Boahen, Ajayi, & Tidy 1986:29-30). The first group of freed slaves who arrived in 1836 from Brazil were mostly Muslims. They settled in places like James Fort and Ussher Fort in Accra and Kotokoraba in Cape Coast. In July 1872, about 300 Hausa Muslims were among the second batch of freed slaves who arrived (Debrunner 1967:62). Other Muslim groups, who arrived and settled in the zangos were of ethnic Wangara, Kotokoli, Hausa, Yoruba, and Fulani descent. These Muslims were attracted to the cocoa plantations and mining areas such as Tarkwa and Prestea (Buah 1998:32). Unlike their counterparts in the other parts of the country, these groups of Muslims lived in their quarters. They did not intermingle and interact with the native people (Schildkrout 1978:89). As a result, they contributed very little in spreading Islam or impacting the royal courts and the general society. To Debrunner, this situation of non-involvement of the Muslims was partly caused by the natives who were unimpressed with the English language that the Muslims spoke (Debrunner 1967:62). Even today, one can observe the mistrust and suspicion that are associated with the eventual relationship.

### ***Indigenization by Reinterpretation***

The fusion of the indigenous and Islamic cultures has created a form of Islam which is unique to Ghanaians but also identical, in many ways, to the Islamic religion worldwide. It is Islam which is not only unique but also relevant to the worldview and imaginations of the people of Ghana (Hiskett 1984:120; Adu Boahen *et al.* 1986:29-30). This Islam in Ghana has been described in many terms by scholars. For example, Hiskett alludes to syncretism as she writes about the Muslim rulers in Northern Ghana, stating that they ‘referred to both shrine priests and Muslim *imāms*, requiring the traditional ritual from

the former and Muslim prayers from the latter' (Hiskett 1984:121). Trimmingham, however, prefers the term 'spiritual dualism' for the Islamic practices (Trimingham 1966:67). The renowned Fulani scholar, Usuman dan Fodio refers to the Islamic religion practiced in Dagomba as 'infidelity' (Clarke 1982:56). For Goody, Islam is a 'mix' religion (Goody 1968:204). Clarke also refers to the Muslims in Wa who 'forged ties with the chiefs and took on the language and many of the customs of the local people. They also allowed Islam to be adapted to a very considerable degree to the local culture' (Clarke 1982:96)

Adding his voice to Clarke, Levtzion mentions a Dagomba Muslim who was both an indigenous priest of the local shrine and an *imam* at the Mosque (Levtzion 1968:87). There were also some local rulers and traders who, though they embraced Islam, also performed their indigenous customary practices as leaders of the communities (Goody 1968:199). In relation to these, both Goody (1968:168) and Levtzion (1979:62) indicate that the Damba festival was celebrated in Gonja to mark the birthday of Prophet Muhammad with solely indigenous religious features. Nobili (2020:332) notes that the 'syncretic' descriptions of Islam in West Africa and more specifically Ghana, have created two main impressions: 1) That the transmission of Islam was somehow 'incomplete' or 'not-perfect' at a time in history; and 2) that Islam was perfected or made complete or purged in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries only by Islamic revolutions (jihāds) led by Muslim reformists such as 'Uthmān Fūdī (died in 1818) and Aḥmad Lobbo (died in 1845), founders of the caliphates of Sokoto and Ḥamdallāhi respectively, and al-ḥājj 'Umar (died in 1865). It is significant to note that the unfortunate descriptions have been condemned by scholars who went on to taut *Islam noir* (black Islam) as the best Africa can do with Islam (Triaud 2014:14).

## **Unaccommodating Attitude and the Planting of Islam: Attempts at De-indigenization of Islam**

Despite the accommodating efforts of the Dyula Muslims to endear Islam to indigenous Ghanaian life, there has been a growing attempt by reformists and revivalists to rid Islam of its indigenous influences in Ghana (Levtzion 1968:102; Sanneh 1997:23). These reformists have regarded indigenous Ghanaian influences on Islam as a bad omen. The history of Islamic religion in

Ghana is full of narrations of reformists who championed unaccommodating attitudes to indigenous ways of life. The perpetrators of this somehow ‘puritan’ Islamic approach/attitude are largely scholars of mainly minority Fulani, Hausa, and Tuareg ethnic origins who, alongside the Dyula traders, moved into and spread the Islamic faith in the northern part of Ghana (Trimingham 1966:131; Buah 1998:45). These Muslim reformists practiced strict and legalistic Islam with an unaccommodating attitude to the life of the indigenes. They have garnered intellectual capabilities in Islamic sciences through their education in, frequent visits, and pilgrimages to Mecca and other parts of the Muslim world (Samwini 2006:78; Adu Boahen *et al.* 1986:29-30).

In Ghana, the Islamic reformist movements have been largely religious endeavors with hardly any Islamic political undertones. Their main mission was to eliminate all indigenous elements which, in their opinion, have corrupted and compromised the belief and practice of Islam in the country. These un-Islamic elements, in their view, included the *ṣūfī* practices of soliciting material and spiritual assistance from dead mystic *ṣūfī* saints (Clarke 1982:111; Nyang 1990:38; Buah 1998:45). Some Tijāniyya Muslims believe that certain saints such as Abdul Qadir Jaylani and Ibrahim Nyass could grant prayers of Muslims. Other un-Islamic elements are superstitious rituals such as spitting in a particular manner during the Ramadan fast to ward off evil spirits and demons, and attract blessings from Allah. Such ‘unwholesome’ practices by Muslims were considered by contemporary Ghanaian reformists as slaps in the face of God and the religion of Islam (Samwini 2006:45; Noaparast 2001:68; Buah 1998:45).

Besides the condemnation of, what they considered as, unwholesome elements, the reformists introduced and preached ‘proper’ practices which hinged on two key foundations/principles of Islam (Noaparast 2001:70). First, a return to Allah as the only object of worship (*tawhīd*) and deserving of prayer. Allah is the creator who keeps every life in being. He is the only source of law and the Supreme Being. Second, a return to the main sources of *sharia*: Qur’ān (the divine revelation to the Prophet Muhammad) and the *Ahadīth* (collection of sayings and actions of Muhammad) for the correct path to salvation (Dumbe 2013:65; Kobo 2012:284).

In contemporary times, Islamic reformists, apart from their exposure to the Muslim world and education in the Islamic sciences and Arabic language (Clarke 1982:111; Wilks 2000:93), have introduced two new dynamics to their mission: 1) That true and authentic Muslims live like the first genera-

tion of Muslims who lived with the Prophet Muhammad. This ‘first generation of Muslim idea’ is at the moment championed in Ghana by two main competing Islamic historico-theological positions: *Salafi* and *Shi’i* (Kobo 2012:284). 2) That the two theologico-historical interpretations of Islamic sources and traditions are presented on the wheels of the foreign policy agendas of diplomatic proportions. The *Salafi/Wahhabi* movement with its various arms is presented as the most authentic face of Islam across sub-Saharan Africa, mainly supported by a foreign policy of Saudi Arabia (Dumbe 2013: 53; Sullivan 1970:438). According to Yunus Dumbe, a Ghanaian Islamic scholar, the *salafi* propagation in Ghana is championed by Saudi Arabia through the activities of Salafi NGOs and Salafi *madrasah* platforms which offer scholarships and humanitarian services to Muslims (Dumbe 2013:30; Ibrahim 2011:14; Sulemana 1994:156). Although Salafism aims at ridding Islam of its external cultural influence, it is hard to believe that they are not pushing the Saudi culture down the throat of Muslims in Ghana (Kobo 2012: 67; Mohammed, Adu-Gyamfi, Sheikh, Yartey, & Darkwa 2021:34).

The *shi’i* movement, though largely religious and theological, has also assumed diplomatic underpinnings. The Iranian government promotes *shi’ism* as a diplomatic agenda through the activities of the Iranian Embassy, the Cultural Consulate, the Agriculture and Rural Development, the Iranian Medical Mission, and the Ahlul-Bait Foundation (Dumbe 2013:98). The activities of the governments of Saudi Arabia and Iran through the *salafi* and *shi’i* movements are threats to the social cohesion and political stability of Ghana because of their conflicting messages which present Islam through both a cultural and political lens. It is easy to agree with Rainer Brunner as he contends that the ‘*Shi’i-Sunni* dichotomy and agenda is the biggest threat to intra-Islam encounters’ and also interreligious relations in Ghana today (Brunner 2004:98). This threat is often manifested in the form of physical attacks leading to bloodshed and polemics in the writings and preaching of the scholars of both sects (Ilahi Tabar 2007:2).

### ***Failure of De-Indigenization***

As already noted, some Muslims of Hausa and Tuareg origins practiced a stricter and more legalistic interpretation of the Qur’ān and the Sunna of the Prophet wherever they went (Ilahi Tabar 2007:1). The strict, pure, and legalistic Islamic way of life, which is meant to deprive Islam of indigenous influences, has been an unsuccessful experience in Ghana. Hiskett has already

observed that during the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, the puritan Hausa Muslims in Dagomba and Mamprusi could not make significant inroads in the lives of the native people. The little impact that they managed to achieve was in the 18<sup>th</sup> century when they made changes to their approach for a flexible and moderate attitude (Hiskett 1984:69). Whenever, Hiskett argues further, they were strict and legalistic and insisted that Muslim converts should be conservative in their practice of Islam, the relationship of the puritan Hausa and Fulani Muslims and the natives ended on a negative note. For instance, the ‘puritan’ Hausa Muslims were accused of putting undue pressure on Na Atabia (a non-Muslim chief of Mamprusi) to put a stop to some ‘superstitious’ indigenous practices associated with the royal courts (Hiskett 1984:69). The uncompromising attitude of the largely Fulani and Hausa reformists which have been carried on by some contemporary groups of Muslim intellectuals, has not gone down well with the native people of the northern states, Bono and Asante, as well as the coastal towns (Bari 2014:56).

Even in contemporary times, the reformist movements, led by the *Salafist*/Saudi and *Shi’i*/Iran groups of Muslims, have been struggling with diminishing membership to make a real impact on indigenous Muslims (Iddrisu 2012:166). Muslim groups, with a sensitivity to indigenous culture and life, continue to have a commanding lead in terms of numbers and impact. It appears that indigenous Muslims and even non-Muslims have indicated in many ways their preference for Islam which is relevant to their religious worldview and spiritual aspiration (Bari 2014:19). The inability of the contemporary reformists to spread, despite massive external support could be attributed to their unaccommodating attitude, which frowned on what they considered to be mediocrity in religion. Thus, the Muslim reformists represent an Islamic trend, which has been less tolerant and less sympathetic to the indigenous culture (Ryan 1996:75; Kobo 2015:66).

## **The Phase of Islam in Contemporary Ghana**

It is worthy to note that the practice of Islam in Ghana today is a reflection of various responses to the planting strategies (Apotsos 2022:144). On the one hand, there is a moderate Islam which is clearly a response to the tolerant and accommodating approach to indigenous customs and tradition. On the other hand, there is a conservative position of Islam which despises any indigenous

influences. In his book *Development of Islam in West Africa*, Hiskett observes two different forms of Islam in Dagomba and Mamprussi, stating that ‘two levels of Islam emerged; the ancient one, of the Dyula Muslims (*yar-nas*), which are barely distinguishable from the native earth cult and a new, strictly Sunni and very literate Islam of the Hausa immigrants’ (Hiskett 1984:56; original emphasis).

In Ghana, these two levels of Islam can currently also be identified. There is a mainstream Muslim group which belongs to Mālikī *madhhab* of Qādiriyya (founded by Abdul Qadir Jaylani) and Suwarian/Tijāniyya (founded by Ahmad al-Tijani), *tariqa* (*spiritual path*), and *Asrar* (*secrets*) (Ryan 1996:78; Kobo 2015:67). Over time, the more flexible ethos of the reformist Tijāniyya reinforced by the Fayda movement of the *ṣūfī* revivalist Ibrahim Nyass from Senegal created an open space for the ordinary Muslims and contributed a lot to the dwindling fortunes of the Qādiriyya in Ghana and endearing the Tijāniyya to both Muslims and non-Muslims (Bari 2014:75; Abdul Wadud 2009:34; Apotsos 2022:145). This group constitutes the largest group of Muslims in Ghana and has largely inherited Islam through the Dyula Muslim tradition of flexible, accommodating relations to the indigenous life (Dumbe 2013:52). They are the followers of the *Suwari* school which, generally, encourages Muslims in their religiously plural state to be conscious of their faith while respecting the worldview or basic beliefs of the faiths of the others (Levtzion & Pouwels 2000:45). It is a tradition which permits Muslims to live amongst non-Muslims and to set before them the example of the Prophet. The Qādiriyya and the Suwarian/Tijāniyya Muslims feel at home with their Ghanaian non-Muslim neighbors and have developed sufficient and workable relationships with them (Stewart 1965:98; Hiskett 1984:56; Levtzion & Pouwels 2000:67).

The second largest group of Muslims in Ghana, started by Benjamin Sam (of the Fante group) at Ekumfi Ekrawfo in the Central Region, has metamorphosed into the Ahmadiyya Muslim Movement and could be found across the country (Samwini 2006:59). It has become part of the worldwide Islamic messianic movement founded by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad in Punjab in India (Hanson 2017:80). The Ahmadiyya Muslim Movement has attracted many Ghanaians unto its fold with a presence which is felt across the country. As a reformist religious movement in terms of theology and doctrine, the Ahmadiyya Muslim group initially caused some confusion with their constant attacks on the Tijāniyya Islamic and even Christian teachings (Samwini

2006:67). On many occasions this movement declared other Muslims as *mushriqūn* (*unbelievers*) (Ali 2008:27; Apotsos 2022:145). However, over time, the members of the movement have toned down their attacks, succumbing to the general Ghanaian accommodating nature, and have developed positive relations with Christians and even Muslims. Its national office coordinates the affairs of the movement and ensures that the group impacts society in a significant and positive way. In terms of formal education and health provision, the contribution of the Ahmadiyya Muslims cannot be overstated. In Ghana, however, the Ahmadiyya movement is, perhaps, the most organized Muslim sect with centers scattered across the country such as Saltpong, Kumasi, Accra, Tamale, and Wa (Hanson 2017:83; Apotsos 2022:148).

Another Islamic sect in Ghana is the *Ahlus Sunna wal-Jama'a* (ASWAJ). This sect has become a platform for the followers of strict Islamic practices, following the line of *wahhabi/salafi* Islamic thoughts (Dumbe 2013:62; Bari 2015:527). Since its formation in 1997, this largely Saudi sponsored *Ahlus Sunna* group has competed in many ways with its sister Saudi sponsored group, the Supreme Council for Islamic Call and Research (SCICR), on issues relating to *da'wah* and *ulama* representation (Dumbe 2013:62; Bari 2015:527). Dumbe acknowledges that most graduate students from Saudi Arabia have preferred the *Ahlus Sunna* group. It is easy to associate the *Ahlus Sunna* reformist/revivalist group with the descendants of the conservative Hausa/Tuareg Muslims of the 14<sup>th</sup> century (Kobo 2015:60; Apotsos 2022:148). Being a reformist movement, ASWAJ has devoted significant time, energy, and resources to ridding Islam of *bid'a* (*innovation*) brought into Islam, particularly by the Tijāniyya Muslim groups in Ghana (Iddrisu 2012:168). In August 1997 the group registered as an independent Muslim sect in Ghana with their national headquarters at Nima (Accra) and being headed by a national chief *Imām*. It is surprising that even today the group continues to share some mosques for prayers and other rituals with other Muslim groups in many parts of the country.

Some Muslims in Ghana have come to embrace *Shi'i* and uphold *Imamat* or Imamate (a belief in the divine leadership of the twelve infallible Imams) as fundamental theological requirement (Tabataba'i 2005:75). They belong to the *Shi'i* sect who believes that Ali and his descendants were the legitimate successors of the Prophet and divinely appointed leaders of the *ummah* after the demise of Prophet Muhammad. They disagree with the Sunni concept of caliphate and even describe it as a usurpation of the rights of

Ali and his progeny (Subhani 2001:189; Apotsos 2022:148). Shi'ism in Ghana is promoted by the Islamic Republic of Iran through its embassy in Accra.

## **Conclusion**

In this essay, Islam in Ghana was discussed with a focus on the agents and their attitudes to the indigenous way of life. The different levels of native responses and the eventual acceptance of Islam by way of reinterpretation in the old indigenous cultural and religious practices are also examined. The reinterpretation, which Islam has endured in Ghana, leading to the evolution of a culture of Islam very much at home with the native people but in many ways different from that of the outside world, is a natural outcome of the fusion of the cultures and religions. It appears, for now, that Ghanaians have bought into the moderate, accommodating Islam. Here moderation does not mean that Muslims are watering down their faith. Faith in Allah and Islam is paramount to Muslims in Ghana. 'Moderation', however, is a reference to the Muslim attitude to an indigenous society and non-Muslims. It means tolerance, respect, and a keen interest in the faith of others which often wins the hearts of everybody.

Even though revivalism has been taking place for a long time with their religious agenda to purify Islam of un-Islamic elements in Ghana, contemporary Islamic reforms and revival agendas have been led and championed by Saudi Arabia and Iran embassies. The eventual efforts at Islamization by these powerful countries are geared towards promoting ideals of Islam in line with their countries' understanding of the religion. The Saudi embassies are pushing *Wahhabi/Salafi* Islam while the Iran embassy, through the Islamic University and other educational facilities, are promoting Shi'i ideals. The efforts of these two countries have not only religious but also political and security implications.

It is significant to note that the mix of Middle Eastern geo-politics and religion as witnessed in the relations existing between *Ahlus sunna* and Saudi Arabia on the one hand and Shi'ism and Iran on the other hand is a cause for concern to many well-meaning Ghanaians who are champions of the peaceful co-existence of all religious traditions for a wholistic human development. The constant effort by both Saudi/*salafi* and Irani/*shi'i* movements, through various means, to attract the more accommodating main-



stream Muslims led by the Tijāniyya unto their side has become not just a project for Islamization but also an undeniable cultural race for the soul of Islam in Ghana.

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