

# Change And Cultural Survival In Dagbon: Assessing The Influence Of Islam On Aspects Of Dagbamba Cultural Practices

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*Abstract: Traditional cultural practices reflect values, norms, beliefs and myths held by members of a community spanning generations. All social groups all over the world have specific practices and beliefs which often have strong cultural underpinnings. These can be positive, but they can also be negative. Almost all societies have positive cultural practices that are beneficial to all members, such as those which sustain society, provide cohesion and solidarity, and promote development in its broad sense. However, all cultures are inherently predisposed to change and, at the same time, to resist change. There are dynamic processes operating that encourage the acceptance of new ideas while there are others that encourage changeless stability. This paper gives a historical account about how Islam influences the indigenous belief system of the people of Dagbon in northern Ghana. The relevance of the paper has to do with the manner the practice of Islam among the Dagbamba has eclipsed the socio-religious functions of the tindamba (earhpriests) who were once seen as the religious torchbearers of the people.*

*Keywords: Tindana; Earth Priest; Dagbon; Dagbamba; Yaa Naa, Islam, culture*

## I. INTRODUCTION

In the social and religious life of the believers of the Traditional African Religion in Dagbon, great prestige and importance is attached to the *tindana* (Earth Priest) who is seen as the protector of the Earth Shrine.<sup>1</sup> In Dagbani (the language of the Dagbamba)<sup>2</sup> the Earth Priest is known as the *tindana*.

It is generally believed, especially among the peoples of northern Ghana, that Earth Priest must be the first inhabitant or descendent of the first inhabitant of the given territory through a pact with the earth deity or, in some cases, with the bush spirits (Carola, 2006: 18). Many of the Voltaic Peoples believe that, the spiritual function of the *tindana* was based on his or her being a descendent of the first inhabitant of a given territory and from the acceptance of the Earth Spirit and the ancestors. He or she was obliged by tradition to offer sacrifices to the earth spirit in order to secure the favour and blessings of the spirits for all the members of the community (Carola, 2009). The *tindana* was also responsible for the performance of rituals connected with the sowing and the

harvest, when he or she asked the spirits for rain and good crops, and when he or she offered thanks for yields and prosperity. He or she offered consistent prayer, offerings and sacrifices to the spirits with a view to attracting their favour, deterring their anger or calling for help against enemies (Goody, 1956: 79; Henryk, 2003: 425; Weiss, 2002: 94). The *tindana* performed these functions because the people regarded him/her as the mediator between the community and the Earth (Wilks, 1989: 17). It was a proverbial wisdom, therefore, that the strength of a *tindana* was the strength of the people, and the strength of a people was the strength of the *tindana* (Ferguson, 1997).

Rattray (1932) recognizes that the Earth Priests had spiritual rather than secular and physical authority. He sees them as controlling the supernatural world in a much positive way for the benefit of the community. They were [and still are] 'the principal fetish priests' and had duties connected with the land boundaries (Blair, 1932). However, this does not mean that they owned the land in the literal sense. But in reality, the land belonged to the fetish and everything growing

on it. This could be the reason why it was unthinkable among the people to sell land (Hagberg, 2006: 99).

However, the social setting and traditional roles of the *tindaamba* (plural for *tindana*) in Dagbon have altered in many significant ways since the introduction of Islam into the Kingdom (Arhin, 2007:96). The purpose of this brief essay – offered as a preliminary investigation of the influence of Islam on the cultural practices of the Dagbamba – is to examine how the Islamic religion impacted – albeit negatively – on the socio-religious functions of the *tindaamba*. This however, does not imply that other factors play no role in explaining the ‘torpid’ nature of the office of the *tindaamba* in its current state. I acknowledge the fact, that before Islam could gain root in the Dagbon kingdom, the *tindaamba* were ‘massacred’ by Naa Nyagsi. Subsequently, the office of the *tindaamba* was brought under the authority of the chiefly rank who had usurped some of the traditional powers of the *tindaamba* (Tamakloe, 1931b). Clearly, in an introductory paper of this kind, all of those issues cannot be pursued in great detail and across all the many dimensions of historical change implicated in the evolution of the *tindaamba*. What I seek to do therefore, is not to belittle the role played by other factors, but to bring to the fore – the yet to be explored subject – the impact of foreign religions (in this case Islam) on the functions of the *tindaamba*. It is worth bearing in mind that, since the development of Islam in the kingdom around the sixteenth century (arguably), some changes have occurred (though those changes could be conservative, slow, and happenstance in nature) in the indigenous religious practices of the people including the office of the *tindaamba*. Although the study of the evolution of the *tindaamba* is rather well established, this aspect of Islam and the *tindaamba* has so far been less examined by researchers.

## II. A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

Since this article is based on an ethnographic study, respondents were allowed to speak on the issues. I therefore used two basic research tools for data collection. These were interviews and observation. With the interview I was able to access information that might otherwise not be captured if I were to use, for instance, a structured questionnaire. The interview provided my respondents with the opportunity to express their thoughts on the subject matter; this, the structured questionnaire could not have achieved (Minichiello et al., 1995). This tool (structured questionnaire) gives respondents limited freedoms to express themselves since they are required to choose from a limited set of options as possible answers. The only problem with the interview was that some of the respondents wanted to glorify the past or distort the facts to suit their own purpose, but I balanced this with archival sources and written literature. Historical records relating to the evolution of the *tindaamba*, dating back to pre-Islamic Dagbon, constituted the main source of written information for data collection.

The interview was conducted in seven *tindaamba* Shrines (Tindanparabiyili, Gong, Yong-Duuni, Gukpegu (Tamale), Tampion, Mbanaayili and Katariga) of the Dagbon kingdom. In each of the seven shrines I selected for the study, seven

individuals were interviewed, making it a total of forty-nine respondents. Respondents were carefully selected and included the *tindaamba*, workers of the shrines, community elders (*kpamba*), the commoners (*tarimba*) and Islamic clerics (*Alfanima*). The interviews were conducted in the local dialect (*Dagbani*), and transcribed verbatim to represent the views of the respondents as accurately as possible. Participant observation also forms part of the data. Some of the information shared in this article is as a result of my personal experience, having lived in the area for over twenty years. I also talked to the *lunse* (drum-historians) and studied their song texts and drum chants as part of the data collection.

## III. STRUCTURE OF THE PAPER

The paper is discussed under three major sections. The first section takes a look at the process of Islamization in Dagbon and discusses the various opinions on the period and the manner the religion of Islam was introduced into the ancient kingdom. The second part focuses on the influence of Islam on the functions of the *tindaamba*. The relevance of this section has to do with the manner the practice of Islam among the Dagbamba has eclipsed the socio-religious functions of the *tindaamba* who were once seen as the religious torchbearers of the people. The final section considers the reasons for the popularity of Islam among the Dagbamba. Conventional narrations suggest that about ninety-five per cent of Dagbamba nationwide are Muslims. Considering that Islam is foreign to the indigenous Dagbamba people, the question of knowing why, and how the religion is deeply rooted among the Dagbamba is normally posed.

## IV. ISLAMIZATION OF DAGBON

The issue of when Islam was introduced into the ancient kingdom of Dagbon has always been a confused one. During the sixth decade of the eighteenth century, Dagbon was described as the ‘Mohammadan Kingdom of Dagbon’ (Ferguson, 1972:314; Römer, 2000:171). In the mid-nineteenth century, informants told Barth that the people of Yendi were idolaters, “who...drink *buza* or *peto* [maize beer] in great quantity. The name of the Governor is Kirgangu, before whose house two baskets of meat are daily given to vultures, to whom a sort of worship seems to be paid.” (ibid.315) However, during that same period, Gouldsbury, the first known European to have visited Yendi said the following in 1876: “Yendi is the chief town of a considerable extent of the country, and its king reigns over many towns and villages. The greater portions of the population are followers of Mohammed, and the most superficial observer could at once perceive that the people were believers in a less degrading worship or creed than that of fetishism.” (ibid)

There seems to be an agreement among some colonial officials that during the second half of the eighteenth century, majority of the inhabitants in Dagbon were ‘Mohammadants’.<sup>3</sup> When the Frenchman Binger visited Karaga in 1888, he observed that the major part of the population was Muslim, though according to him there was no mosque in the town

(Ferguson, 1972: 315). Also, in 1898, Captain Mackworth noted that in Dagbon all the big chiefs were 'Mohammadan' men, and have Arabic clerks and priests.<sup>4</sup>

There is some smell of truth in these narrations. Indeed, the history of Islam in the Dagbon kingdom could be longer than most historians think, extending back to the sixteenth century. As I indicated elsewhere, oral traditions with regard to the spread of Islam in Dagbon abound (Abdallah, 2012). One of such traditions recounted how Yaan Naa Dimani (ruled from 1514 to 1527) had lived in the bush with a Hausa man known as Kankang Daliya Yelkonde, who was a butcher. The tradition had it that after the death of the butcher, Dimani inherited the butcher's knife to practice as the first Dagbamba butcher. The Hausa butcher was regarded as one of the pre-Islamic Hausa migrants in the Voltaic Basin who were credited for having introduced Islam into the Dagbon Kingdom in the sixteenth century. Consequently, the argument is that the origin of the islamization of Dagbon should be sought among the indigenes of the 'First Kingdom', i.e. from the era of Yaan Naa Nyagsi to Yaan Naa Gungobili (Benzing, 1971; Weiss, 2008: 78).<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, it is worth noting that the introduction of Islam into the Kingdom was a process and not an event (Goody, 1954, 1953; Harrow, 1991; Hiskett, 1984; Hodgkin, 1966; Samwini, 2006; Weiss, 2004; Wilks 1965, 1963, 1954). And this could explain why some parts of the kingdom were seen as 'Mohammadan', whilst others could best be described as 'idolaters'. The entire Dagbon state could not have been governed by the 'Codes of Islamism' at the same time (Arhin, 1974).

#### A. THE NAA ZANJINA FACTOR

Naa Zanjina was the Yaan Naa of Dagbon from 1648 to 1677. There has been some difficulty in accepting the assertion that it was during the reign of Naa Zanjina that Islam was introduced into the Dagbon Kingdom. According to Weiss, Naa Zanjina was credited with having invited some Muslim traders – Mande and Hausa – to stay in Dagbon. The intention was to make Yendi an important stopping on the caravan route (Weiss, 2008:77). However, Levtzion (1968:86) argued that the invitation of Muslim traders by Zanjina to settle in Yendi did not indicate the beginning of Muslim settlement and the subsequent introduction of Islam in Dagbon as there were traces of Mande or Wangara Muslim settlements in old Yendi (*Yani Dabari*) where, according to Levtzion, excavations have revealed the remnants of a rectangular-shaped building different from other buildings in the town.

Another version suggests the presence of a Muslim Mande trader called 'Umar Jabaghte among the Konkomba in Eastern Dagbon long before the place was invaded by Naa Luro.<sup>6</sup> This is to support the argument that Islam pre-existed Naa Zanjina. Some informants even hold the view that Islam was introduced into Dagbon by Naa Nyagsi who ruled Dagbon from 1416 to 1432. Yet, others believe that Islam entered Dagbon during the reign of Yaan Naa Luro, but that the actual spread and expansion of the religion was under Yaan Naa Andani Sigli (ruled from 1677 to 1687). If these traditions are anything to go by, what it then means is that, Naa Zanjina only strengthened the establishment of Islam and the growth of

Muslim authority in the court of Yendi. Tamakloe (1931a) observes that the first thing Zanjina did to grow the relationship that had existed between the Muslim migrants and the people of Dagbon was to embrace Islam himself and encourage his elders to do so:

'Naa Zanjina's first act was to embrace Islam. His elders and himself were taught to pray five times a day and the ablution was made by Yamusa, the Imam of Sabare, a town near Napkari. The Imam Yamusa and the other *Mallams*, who formed his retinue, had come from Wangara and settled in this place in the previous reign' (Tamakloe, 1931a: 28).

According to Wilks (1965), Naa Zanjina had converted to Islam before he became the king of Dagbon. Therefore, Zanjina could be seen as the first Muslim to become a Yaan Naa and not the vice versa. However, Blair (1932) argues that Zanjina never had any cordial relations with the Muslims before he became the king; and that, it was after he was chosen as the king of Dagbon that his interest towards the activities of Muslims started. Blair contended that, in his bid to extend his influence to the Oti River, Naa Zanjina went to Sabari where he met with some Muslim scholars and subsequently built a mosque there and had his people and his children taught the Qur'an.

The point made by Wilks seems to have some popular support in Dagbon. The popular tradition in the kingdom is that, when Zanjina's father, Naa Tutugri (ruled from 1570 to 1589) wanted to know who among his children would be his successor, he asked Sulaymana, a Mande Muslim to find out. According to the tradition, Sulaymana could not directly point to any of the children as the possible successor to the throne, but had shown to the King the woman who would give birth to the successor. This woman turned out to be the mother of Naa Zanjina, and as a result Zanjina was sent to Sabari to learn the Qur'an. If this legend is anything to go by then, Wilks's argument that Zanjina was a Muslim before he was selected as the king of Dagbon is worth considering. This also means that Naa Zanjina could not have played a leading role in the introduction of Islam into the Dagbon kingdom.

Many of the drum historians or the *Lunsi* in Dagbon are of the view that, Islam had already established among the royals even long before the era of Naa Zanjina as a king of the kingdom. The general belief is that the expansion of Islam in Dagbon could be attributed to the arrival of one Shaykh Sulaymana b. Abdallah Bagayugu, a Wangara teacher linked with the Western Sudanese city of Timbuktu (Wilks, 1965: 93-94; Ferguson, 1972: 48-52, 64; Massing, 2004).<sup>7</sup> Members of the Bagayugu fraternity were among the early Islamic scholars ('Ulama) in the Western Sudan Region.<sup>8</sup> Sulaymana came to Yendi, the capital of Dagbon, in the mid-sixteenth century at the time Naa Luro was the king of Dagbon. Oral history has it that al-Shaykh Sulaymana made the decision to settle in Dagbon because of the love of Islam that the king, Naa Luro, had exhibited.<sup>9</sup>

Another manuscript written in the latter half of the nineteenth century by Naa Mole Zakariyya b. Yusuf and cited by Ferguson (1972), suggested a pre-Zanjina Islamic presence in Dagbon. According to Mole Zakariyya, most princes in Dagbon were, during their childhood days given to *kpamba* for training to become good leaders in the future.<sup>10</sup> Naa Luro

was therefore given out to be trained. According to the author, Naa Luro later became a trader in golden and copper rings, and got the gold from the south and the copper from Wagadugu. It was during this period that Naa Luro came into contact with the Islamic scholar, Shaykh Sulaymana who was very rich in gold and silver. The possibility is that after the prince (Luro) had become the overlord of Dagbon, he welcomed the Shaykh to his court in Yendi and was persuading him to settle permanently in Dagbon (Abdallah, 2012).

## V. THE IMPACT OF ISLAM ON THE TINDAAMBA

Islam has made greater impact on the religious attitudes, values and culture of the Kingdom of Dagbon. Islam came with its own system of writing, education and warfare. The introduction of Islam into Dagbon and its associated practices have ambivalent effects on every aspect of the life of the people including, marriage, divorce, inheritance, among others (Awedoba, 2007:20). One of the indigenous institutions that suffered major setbacks because of the introduction of Islam into Dagbon is the *tindaamba* institution.

After the 'islamization' of Dagbon, the traditional way of associating with God was the first to suffer the vilification of Islamic scholars. Before the introduction of Islam into the ancient kingdom of Dagbon, the Dagbamba were rooted in the practice of the indigenous African traditional religion led by the earth priests, the *tindaamba*. The traditional religious practice in Dagbani is referred to as *Barayuli Malibu*, the veneration of the gods or ancestors as the case may be. In almost every village or household, there were sacred shrines referred to in Dagbani as *Bura* (plural for *Burili*). In individual households or clans, the *Yidana* or family head – serving as master of the cult – was in charge of the necessary rituals and sacrifices. However, within the village or town, the earth priest or *tindana* would be the care taker. These *Bura* or shrines were highly respected, because for the Dagbamba traditionalists, they could only get to *Naawuni* (Almighty God) through them (the *Bura*).

Like most Africans, the Dagbamba did not see themselves as worshipping smaller gods or *Wuna*, they were only serving the Supreme Being through the smaller ones. Indeed, the African world was a religious world in which the idea of God as the Supreme Being was already known and held in great awe by the people (Gyekye, 1996; Okot, 1971; Robin, 1984). Accordingly, the smaller gods were only seen as "the messengers of God", whom God selects and who stand as His representatives (Mbiti, 1970:220-221). Generally in Africa, the concept is that:

...God is the Supreme Being but not the object of direct 'worship'. Worship is directed to trees, rocks, rivers, and mountains...It is believed that objects of nature are inhabited by spiritual beings or deities who are also thought to exist in the universe as intermediaries between God and humans but who cannot be seen by human eye. Therefore, any worshipful attitude shown toward rocks, rivers, and other objects of nature is intended for these spiritual beings, not for the objects themselves. Thus because of the presence of spiritual

beings, objects of nature take on religious significance and command human respect (Gyekye, 1996:6-7).

According to one of my informants, every person in the kingdom of Dagbon prior to the introduction of Islam into the area was involved in this form of traditional religious practice; and a violation of the practice would be to isolate oneself from the group and to disrupt one's sense of communal membership and security and lose much the meaning of life (ibid).

Apart from the *Bura*, another way a Dagbamba man could express his religiosity was through the ancestors, referred to in Dagbani as *Yaannima*, the 'living dead'. The spirits of these living dead, who died long ago and who now act as guardians of families and individuals, are seen as servants. They were regarded as being nearest to God in rank, and acting as his messengers and executors of the divine will. Therefore, anytime there was drought or famine, the *Yaannima*, or ancestors would be contacted, through the earth priest, to intervene on their behalf for rain (ibid).

However, with the advent of Islam in Dagbon, all this traditional way of getting closer to God suffered and continues to suffer a ceaseless attack by indigenous Islamic scholars who condemn the followers of the traditional African religion to hell after death. One of the cardinal principles of Islam is to worship Allah alone and not to associate any partners with Him. Therefore, the position of the Islamic scholars is that, calling on anybody's name for help apart from Allah is tantamount to associating partners with Him.<sup>11</sup> Today in Dagbon, though the *Bura* and the *Yaannima* are still consulted on important matters affecting the lives of the people, the Muslim majority in the kingdom have relegated the office of the *tindaamba*, who are the custodians of the *Bura* and the spirits of the *yaannima* to the background.<sup>12</sup>

According to my impression, after interacting with the *tindaamba*, another way Islam has affected the roles of the *tindaamba* in Dagbon has to do with medication and the ability to find solutions to some of the existential problems of the people. Before the introduction of Islam into the Western part of Africa, the traditional priests were noted for the preparation of herbal medicine for the treatment of numerous ailments in their various communities. Their duties were not only making sacrifices, offerings, and prayers, but also they could investigate to find out the cause of an ailment or a particular calamity and how to appease the gods or spirits through divination. It is important to state that the ability to heal traditionally was not the preserve of the *tindaamba*; there were (and still are) traditional healers who did not belong to the *tindaamba* lineage. This practice, to some extent, helped the *tindaamba* to, as one of them put it, 'get something for the family.' With the coming of Islam, the priests seem to be losing or have lost the benefits and the recognition to the *Alfanima* or the *Mallams* in the community.<sup>13</sup>

In Dagbon, and many other communities, people express their faith in God and His powers to assist in the pursuit of a 'good life' in many ways. The knowledge of the Qur'an and its teaching in Dagbon today is a particularly effective means for pursuing spiritual and physical well-being. The practice of what is today known as *Tibbu*, a corruption of the Arabic word *Tib* (i.e. medicine) was first introduced into Dagbon by the Wangara traders who are believed to have brought Islam into the kingdom (Osman, 2009:126). Almost every village or



town in Dagbon has one *Mallam* or another who claims to possess some spiritual powers, believed to have been derived from the Qur'an, to solve problems for people. They make special talismans and amulets for people and make them believe that these objects possess some spiritual powers that can help make people powerful and also to be able to: find a spouse, have children, find employment, prevent illness, bring good fortunes and protect a household, among others (Robinson, 2004)<sup>14</sup> In some cases the *Mallam* produces what is known in Dagbani as *Walga*. This is produced by writing a verse or verses from the Qur'an or other religious text on a wooden tablet which is then washed into a bowl. The person making the request then drinks the 'writing water'. By drinking the 'word of God', an individual internalizes the text and thus introduces it into the body. In addition to drinking it, people also bathe with it or use it to wash objects. Some of these *Mallams* also perform special prayers for people upon request. While privately reciting the prayer, the *Mallam* burns incense that is believed to attract messengers who in turn carry the request to God where it is heard and answered. This special prayer may be recited by a group of *Mallams*. For instance, in 1998, an incident occurred in a village in the Kumbungu traditional area. The chief of the village consulted his Chief Imam (the spiritual leader of the Muslims in the village) to recite the Qur'an to solicit God's assistance in ending what they termed as 'inexplicable deaths' at the time. This nearly sparked an uncontrollable dispute between the traditionalists and the Chief Imam's outfit because the traditionalists felt marginalised. The *tindana* of the area was later given some objects of sacrifice to perform the same rituals. This *Tibbu* practice has become a full time job for some Muslim clerics in Dagbon at the expense of the traditional priests who have lost many of their 'Customers' to the *Mallams*.<sup>15</sup> What is ironical about this whole issue is the fact that some of the adherents of the traditional African religion including relatives of some of the *tindaamba* also patronise the services of the *Mallams*.

There was a widespread acceptance among some of my informants that, the Qur'anic education that came along with Islam has had some tremendous impact on the roles played by the *tindaamba* in the community. It is important to recall that, when it was realised that many people in Dagbon had embraced Islam and had started observing the compulsory daily prayers at the appointed times, the few indigenous scholars and Hausa *Mallams* found it necessary to introduce Qur'anic schools, popularly called *Mankaranta* in the Hausa language, to teach the new converts how to read the Qur'an to be able to use it in their prayers.<sup>16</sup> In the early fifties of the last century, many Dagbamba Muslims who sought to know more about Islam, gained scholarships and travelled to the Middle East especially, Saudi Arabia- the birth place of Islam. When these students completed their studies and returned home, they tried to put Islam in its rightful perspective (Abdulai, 2009). This was, as one elderly man confided in me, the beginning of the end of some of the long cultural practices in Dagbon. Many of them, upon their return home, started preaching in public places against the indigenous system of worship on which the concept of the *tindana* is based. What was more 'painful' to them, according to one of the *tindaamba*, is the fact that some members from the *tindaamba* gates got

converted to Islam and turned their back on their own culture. The current *tindana* at *Tindanparabiyili* revealed that she got the opportunity to occupy the position because the person who was due to become the *tindana* got married to an Islamic scholar and had even gone to Mecca as part of her Islamic religious duties. This woman therefore refused to become the *tindana* because of her status as *Hajia*.<sup>17</sup> The *tindaamba* therefore feel that some of their people see their practice as 'satanic', 'paganic' and 'barbaric' (Launay, 1992). They would neither eat their food nor participate in their ritual practices any longer, all in the name of their newly found faith (i.e. Islam), one of them said. One traditional leader in Gukpegu (Tamale) remarked sarcastically during a group discussion that: '*Din kuli bi'eri ma nti yari nyela be ni pun mali buxim shili za'aj zali ti achiyooma la.*' (What is more annoying for me is the fact that they [the Muslim scholars] have already prepared a hell fire for us [the *tindaamba*] after death).<sup>18</sup>

I also found out during the research that the *tindaamba* lost yet another important role they used to play in the community. Hitherto, the concept of 'forecasting the future' or *Baya buxubu* in Dagbani, was the preserve of the *tindaamba* and some few skilful traditionalists. Whenever there was a calamity, or something untoward, in the community, the first point of call to find out the cause was the *Buxili Lana yi'ja*, the priest's house. Individuals also went to the traditional priest to find out what the future had in stock for them. This practice contributed to making the office of the *tindaamba* an enviable one because they could derive an income out of it.<sup>19</sup> Now things have changed, according to Nablidoo, the younger brother of the *tindana* in *Tindanparabiyili*.<sup>20</sup> The Hausa and Wangara clerics who are said to have brought Islam into the area also came with the Muslim concept of divination known in Dagbani as *Bihigu nmebu* or *Vihibu*. Through this, they tried to tell the future in an Islamic way. This they do with some fine sand or pebbles, depending on the craft of the individual *Mallam*.<sup>21</sup> Normally, what happens is that the one consulting is made to sit on a mat and listen to what the *Mallam* has to tell him/her. The *Mallam* then spreads the sand in front of him and with some designs in the sand and incantations from the Qur'an, he is able to tell the 'client' what happened, what is likely to happen, and the preparations to be made to avert any possible calamities in the future. If, for instance, the client's future is characterised by hardships and failures, the *Mallam* through divination would ask for Allah's intervention. The Muslim arts of divination are particularly sought in times of war in order to know the propitious time to attack; prayers sought to win battles, war-coats and hats produced (stitched with leather saphies or silvered amulets of Qur'anic verses) to paralyse the enemy's hand, and divert their courses (Amuzu, 2001:31; Seidu, 1989). This practice has persisted till today such that it has created unnecessary friction between the traditional priests and the *Mallams*. Some of the *tindaamba* revealed that the practice has rendered the office of the *tindaamba* useless.

Today, the *Alfanima* [or *Mallams*] are highly respected and are held in high esteem in Dagbon to the detriment of the *tindaamba*. What even worries some of the *tindaamba* is the fact that some chiefs in the kingdom, who are supposed to be the custodians of the tradition, are also being attracted to the work of the *Mallams*. Perhaps, the first time a high profile

person in Dagbon sought the service of a *Mallam* was when Naa Tutuxiri, the father of Naa Zanjina asked Sulaymana, a Mande Muslim cleric, to find out who would succeed him among his sons. The prediction made by Sulaymana came to pass and as a reward, he was given the title *Yar-Naa* of Sabali. It is therefore not unusual for a chief in Dagbon today to send a subject to consult a *Mallam* on his behalf (the chief). This tendency, according to some informants, could have negative repercussions on Dagbon cultural practices.

Power was – and still is – attributed to the words of the Qur'an and as such was accepted as the formula which once applied gives *barakah*, and protection against evil powers (Hunter, 1976). As such, the Muslim clerics have become important personalities in the community as men of power. The Muslim clerics also introduced Islamic elements into some common traditional events in Dagbon, such as births, marriages, etc. For instance, the *Mallams* are now consulted instead of the priests for protection against evil powers during pregnancy and after pregnancy, for the infant. It is therefore, not surprising that the office of the *tindaamba* has been accorded a lower status than the newly found saviour- the *Mallam*.

#### VI. CONVERSION TO ISLAM IN DAGBON: SOME OBSERVATIONS

It is undeniable that Islam is deep rooted among the Dagbamba in northern Ghana. Considering that Islam is foreign to the indigenous Dagbamba people, the question of knowing why and how the religion is deeply rooted among the Dagbamba is normally posed (Abdallah, 2012).

There is a widely shared – almost taken for granted – view that Christian theology and morals were too complex and abstract for the African 'Soul' to grasp, whereas Islam was identified as being more suitable for Africans (Atterbury, 1899:166-9; Barnes, 1995; Walls, 1999). The argument has been that the Africans were too childish or too barbaric to understand the theoretical Christian dogma, whereas Islam was too simplistic - if not primitive enough- for Africans to understand (Weiss, 2008:144, 2001: 86).

However, my interactions with some Islamic scholars and many of the followers of the religion in Dagbon have unpicked other reasons why most Dagbamba people are Muslims. The first among these reasons, as identified by most informants, is the ability of both Islam and the indigenous religion of the Dagbamba people to adapt to each others' contexts. I will not be stretching the point to say that both Islam and the indigenous religion of the people demonstrated remarkable examples and outstanding models of tolerance (UNESCO, 1995). Many of the Islamic scholars interviewed indicated that the Islamic Religion did not arrive on a neutral ground in Dagbon. The kingdom, prior to Islam, was marked by cultural, social and religious values different from those brought by Islam. For example, the Islamic monotheism (*Tawhid*) is different from the concept of God in the indigenous Dagbamba religious thought. In indigenous Dagbamba religion, God is spoken to through rocks, rivers, trees, totems, among others. This is highly forbidden in Islam. But, with a greater flexibility, Islam has been able to co-exist

with the indigenous practices. In other words the new faith did not collide with the old and traditional one (Tamakloe, 1931a:28). Rather, what is noted is the 'mixing' of Islamic and non-Islamic practices and traditions, which colonial French scholars termed as 'Islam noire' (Jean-Louis, 2000; O'Brien, 1967; Robinson, 1988; Sanneh, 1976; Weiss, 2004; Wilks, 2000). It is further suggested by informants that, although Islam condemns polytheism, it recognizes the existence of other spirits and the negative influence of these spirits in the life of men (Qur'an 113: 1-5; 114: 1-6). The consultation of the soothsayers as discussed earlier and the practice of magic for all kinds of reasons, which was a feature of the Dagbamba religion, are given recognition by Islam. Also, polygyny is another indigenous element endorses by Islam.

Another factor identified is that Islam was propagated by the Dagbamba themselves alongside the Hausa and Wangara clerics. The introduction of Islam into the Dagbon kingdom was the work of the Wangara and the Hausa tradesmen (Abdulai, 2005: 53-67). But thereafter, the propagation was done by Dagbamba scholars themselves. This was very important because it removed from Islam its foreign character. Even today in Dagbon, Islam is regarded as an indigenous religion. Ali Mazrui for instance, argues among other things that Islam is an African religion because indigenous Africans carried the banner of Islam, and that unlike Christianity; Islam has a lot of similarities with the traditional African worldview making it less difficult for Africans to convert to Islam (Mazrui, 1986:136-43). This contributed so much to the rooting of Islam in the Dagbon cultural milieu.

There clearly exists among the Dagbamba the notion that Islam is a religion of transcendent power. Right from the beginning of Islam in Dagbon, and in Africa in general, the role of Muslim clerics in spiritual matters was dominating. Clarke (1982:261) for example, narrates a story of how a king of the ancient kingdom of Mali in the eleventh century and his peoples converted to Islam because a Muslim cleric prayed for rain when the whole empire was down with a severe drought. The rituals of the local priests could not change anything. But after the Muslim cleric prayed, there was torrential rain. Muslim clerics' literacy and spiritual powers drew scores of Dagbamba to Islam. The clerics began making amulets with Qur'anic verses which came to displace indigenous talismans and medicinal packets. These amulets still feature in the design of many Dagbamba traditional artefacts. Both archival sources and interviews suggest that many chiefs not only in Dagbon, but elsewhere in Africa accommodated Muslim clerics to profit from their blessings for good health, peace, success in fights against enemies, among others (Raymond et al., 1989: 329; Weiss, 2001: 96). These clerics wielded strong influences in court and in policy formulation (Mazrui, 1986: 95). Therefore, the work of the *Mallams* could only facilitate the acceptance and the integration of Islam by the Dagbon people.

Another interesting reason that was identified by informants is the fact that Islam is seen as a religion of social prestige (Haaber, 2003: 11; Smith, 1874). Most informants say that being a Muslim is more prestigious than any other thing. For them "Islam represented the highest spiritual achievement that could be attained by Africans, being itself superior to any African traditional religion" (Reynolds, 2001). This finds

agreement in the argument of some Islamic scholars that Muslims of the middle social class did not choose Islam for religious reasons but for socio-economic reasons. People who agreed to speak to me on this issue revealed that some Dagbamba are Muslims because they would want an Islamic burial service after their death. Talking about the attraction of Islam on the African kings and princes, Clarke (1982:261) indicates, that Islam had also an international dimension and integrative qualities which made it attractive to the leaders of broad empires where there were pluralism and a considerable cultural, religious and political diversity. Thus, this international nature of Islam was, and is still today a socio-political factor for its deep rooting in the people of Dagbon. One Islamic scholar I spoke to said that everybody was created as a Muslim, it is only the influence of the parents or environment that makes one become otherwise.

## VII. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have examined how the *tindaamba* institution in Dagbon evolved since the introduction of Islamic religion into the kingdom. I argued that, the introduction of Islam into the Dagbon kingdom affected the functions of the *tindaamba* in the area. Many of the *tindaamba* and those who work at the shrines have indicated how Islam influenced the traditional religion of the Dagbamba. Before the advent of the supposedly revealed religions (Islam and Christianity) in Africa, Dagbamba, and for that matter most Africans, were rooted in the practice of the indigenous African traditional religions led by the earth priests. The traditional religious practice in Dagbon is characterized by the veneration of the smaller gods (*Bura*) or ancestors (*yaannima*), as the case may be.

However, Islamic clerics, since the introduction of Islam into the kingdom, have condemned the indigenous way of worshipping God. Today in Dagbon, though the gods and the ancestors are still being consulted on important issues affecting the lives of the people, the Muslim majority in the kingdom have relegated the office of the *tindaamba*, who are the custodians of the gods and the representatives of the ancestors here on earth, to the background. The Islamic theologians believe that God forgives all sins but He does not forgive those who worship other things apart from Him. And that, since the traditional form of worship invokes the services of the smaller gods and the ancestors; it is tantamount to worshipping other things other than God. The fundamental question many of the *tindaamba* raised in the course of the research was, why should they be condemned to hell fire for worshipping God through the spirits when followers of the revealed religions worship God through prominent religious figures like Muhammad (for Islam) or Jesus (for Christianity). The fact that the concept of the priesthood is, in a way based on the traditional African religious belief means that any attack on the indigenous belief system affects the functions of the earth priests in Dagbon.

The paper also reveals the reasons why Islam is deeply rooted among the Dagbamba. Contrary to the popular view of many European scholars that Christian theology and morals were too complex and abstract for the African mind to grasp,

whereas Islam was identified as being more suitable for Africans, the paper identified convincing factors that facilitated the acceptance and growth of Islam among the Dagbamba in particular, and Africans in general. One of these factors as indicated by some informants is the ability of Islam to adapt to the Dagbon, and for that matter, African cultural context. For instance, before Islam was introduced into the Dagbon kingdom, the Dagbamba were practicing polygyny where a man is permitted to marry as many wives as he could. This indigenous practice has found compatibility (to some extent) with the Islamic concept of polygyny. Muslims are permitted to marry up to four wives provided that the man treats all his wives with equal justice (Qur'an 4: 3). This made it possible for many Dagbamba to convert to Islam since they can still have more than one wife as they used to before Islam.

At the same time, what I realised from the ground is the fact that many of those who indicated, that they are deeply committed to the practice of Islam also incorporated elements of African traditional religions into their daily lives. For instance, many Dagbamba believe that sacrifices to ancestors or spirits can protect them from harm. It is also not uncommon to see many chiefs in Dagbon marrying more than the approved number of wives Islam permits its followers to have. This is so because the chiefs operate with considerable autonomy and do not have Muslim scholars regulating their religious practices. However, if the current trend continues where most of the chiefs in Dagbon prior to becoming chiefs have had some level of Islamic education, and also given the fact that no culture is static (every culture is constantly being reshaped by prevalent social, economic, and political conditions), there will be a time in Dagbon when chiefs, who accept the Islamic religion, would conform to the Islamic concept of polygyny and other practices, thereby ceding most of the cultural practices of the ancient kingdom to the Islamic religion.

## NOTES

- ✓ This paper was first presented at the faculty of Social Studies 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Colloquium at the Noguchi Memorial Institute for Medical Research, University of Ghana on the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> December, 2010. I would want to thank my supervisor, Professor Albert K. Awedoba for his words of encouragement and the three anonymous readers for their insightful comments. Because of the adaptation of Islam, Christianity and Western culture or modernization, most Dagbamba no longer associate themselves with the Traditional African Religion, the indigenous religion of Africa.
- ✓ *Dagbamba* is the plural form; an individual is a *Dagbana*. The language is *Dagbani*, with the traditional state called *Dagbon*. The name *Dagbon* is to be preferred to *Dagomba* when describing the kingdom and the political entity. *Dagomba* is the Hausa name for the population and region; *Dagbon* is the name given by the people themselves. *Dagbon* is occupied by *Dagbamba* as well as other ethnic groups, such as the Konkomba. The *Dagbamba*, or anglicized *Dagombas*, belong to the Mole-*Dagbani* group.



- ✓ Most Muslim scholars see the use of the term 'Mohammadants' as a technical misnomer. Followers of the Islamic religion rather preferred to be called Muslims.
- ✓ Public Records Office (PRO), Colonial Office (CO) 879, 52, African (west) 549: Report on Dagomba, 23 May, 1898), 330.
- ✓ Naa Gungobili became the king of Dagbon in 1627 and ruled for 21 years
- ✓ Naa Luro was the king of Dagbon from 1554 to 1570
- ✓ Shaykh, (Arabic). The head or leader of a community
- ✓ 'Ulamā (Arabic), see 'ālim. The class of learned men in a community, Dagbani 'Alfanema'
- ✓ Interview with Zabloug, Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, March 16, 2010
- ✓ It is a common practice in Dagbon for first princes to be given out for training by some elders outside the royal family. The *kpamba* are the councillors of the Yaan Naa or other Nas, who are not themselves entitled to royal office.
- ✓ Interview with Imam Abubakari, Kumbungu, August 13, 2010.
- ✓ Quite a number of informants pointed out that the population of Muslims who are Dagbamba in Dagbon is about 91 percent.
- ✓ *Alfanima* (single, *Alfa*) is a Dagbani term for an Islamic cleric. *Mallam* in the Hausa version for same
- ✓ A talisman or amulet is a device that possesses special powers. It is an 'effective object' used to produce a specific outcome.
- ✓ The term 'cleric' means 'clergyman' as understood in the Christian Protestant tradition. However, the general use of the term is an exclusive reference to black African-Muslim divines in contradistinction to Arab or North African Muslim divines, in most cases without any explanation whatsoever. Some scholars, however, make it explicit that the term 'cleric' refers to Muslim divines who share the worldview of black Africa and are therefore 'generally lesser scholars' than their counterparts who share the North African or Arab worldview, referred to as 'scholars'. See N. Levtzion, *Muslims and Chiefs in West Africa* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 98
- ✓ This was not peculiar to only Dagbon. Islamic scholars all over Africa set up schools where students read the Qur'an, and learn to recite passages from it. They also founded centers of advanced learning where books written by Islamic scholars were studied and discussed. Niamey, the capital of Mali, and Timbuktu of the Songhai Empire developed as centers of learning.
- ✓ *Hajia* is an Arabic term for a woman who has been on a pilgrimage to Mecca. It is *Al-Haji* for a man. Efforts to interview the woman did not yield any results as she was not willing to speak to me.
- ✓ Interview with Alhassan Adam, Yong Duuni, March 20, 2010.
- ✓ I was told that formerly, the *tindaamba* used not to farm because they could get food stuffs from people who consulted them for their personal problems. Also, in places where there were chiefs beside the *tindaamba*, it was the responsibility of the chiefs to take care of their needs
- ✓ Interview with Neinpava, *Tindanparabiyili*, August 11, 2010
- ✓ Though this practice is highly condemned by the Sunni Muslims, it has gained currency in Dagbon today.
- ✓ Interview with Alhassan Adam, Yong Duuni, March 20, 2010
- ✓ *Baraka* is an Arabic term denoting a blessing from Allah in the form spiritual divine presence. Also a spiritual power believed to be possessed by certain persons, objects, tombs among others.
- ✓ *Tawhid* in Islam is to believe in Allah, His Angels, His Messengers, His revealed Books, Day of Resurrection, and Divine Preordainment (i.e. whether what Allah ordained must come to pass); and to act on the five ordained principles of Islam, i.e. to testify that none has the right to be worshiped but Allah and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah, to offer the five compulsory congregational prayers, to pay *Zakat*, to perform Hajj (i.e. pilgrimage to Makkah), to observe fast during the month of Ramadan. To believe in Allah means declaring Allah to be the only God in the heavens and all that exist. See Muhsin, M.: *Translation of the Noble Qur'an in the English Language*, (King Fahad Complex, Madinah, K. S. A., 2002), 887.
- ✓ As Tamakloe states, it was very clear that Islam did not collide with the old traditions of the Dagbamba in particular and the Traditional African Religion in general. For Tamakloe, "The example of Naa Zanjina of being a Muslim and a pagan at the same time has been followed by his successors until the present day". See E. Tamakloe, *A Brief History of the Dagomba People* (S. I. Accra, Ghana, 1931a), 28  
Though Islam has given recognition to the existence of magic and soothsayers, Muslims are not to believe in the powers of magic because this will go contrary to the omnipotent nature of God. There is also a tradition of the Prophet of Islam which says that any Muslim who goes to a soothsayer and then believes in whatever the soothsayer says ceases to be a Muslim until he/she repents.
- ✓ Muslims all over the world always quote Qur'an 4:3 to support their claim that they are permitted by Allah Himself to marry up to four wives if they so wish. The verse in question reads: '...Marry women of your choice, two or three, or four; but if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly with them, then only one that your right hands possess. That is nearest to prevent you from doing injustice.' See Muhsin, *Translation of the Noble Qur'an in the Language*, 105

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