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MUSLIM 'PRIESTHOOD' IN DAGBON: IN SEARCH OF A DEFINITION.

BY

MUSTAPHA ABDUL-HAMID

DEPARTMENT OF RELIGION AND HUMAN VALUES

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE COAST

CAPE COAST

GHANA. WEST AFRICA

TELEPHONE: +233204252522

E-MAIL: bawreh@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Dagbon refers to the geographical area occupied by the Dagomba ethnic group in the Volta Basin in Ghana's administrative region called the Northern Region. The Dagomba are a predominantly islamised people whose social, economic, cultural, economic and political life is largely shaped by Islam. The people who serve as guardians of the Dagomba's Islamic identity and heritage are called *Afanema* (singular, *Afa*). However, there has always been controversy in Dagbon as to who qualifies to be called an *Afa*. These disagreements have often led to bloody conflicts between supporters of people who claim to be qualified as *Afanema* as against those they claim are not qualified to be designated as such. This paper traces the historical and etymological derivation of the term *Afa* and attempts an accurate definition and portrait of the guardians of Islamic lore in Dagbon. This paper contends that *Afanema* in Dagbon are the disseminators of Islamic heritage and knowledge. They are mostly teachers of Islamic lore, mainly through the Qur'an schools and also through *tafsir*, the mass education method where the meaning and interpretation of the Qur'an is made known. They are also professional prayer men, whose prayer is deemed efficacious in the solution of problems. They may or may not be engaged in the art of divination.

## Introduction

Islam has no concept of 'priesthood' as such. The most important aspect of 'priestly' duties in virtually every religious tradition is directing and leading the process of worship. Priests are the guardians of religious lore. In most religious traditions, to become a 'priest', one has to undergo months or years of specialised training in order to qualify for such 'priestly' duties. In Islam, the person who directs and leads the ritual prayer among other duties is called *Limam* an obvious corruption of the original Arabic term *Imam*. In Dagbon, those who lead the ritual prayer among other 'priestly' duties are called *Afanema* (singular, *Afa*).

Islam does not necessarily impose a strict regime of learning and training on its adherents before they can qualify to direct and lead the ritual prayer. In Islam the person who directs and leads the ritual prayer is relative to the congregation that is gathered to perform the ritual prayer at any one particular time.

Narrated by Ibn Mas'ud: Allah's Apostle said, "the one of you who is most versed in Allah's most high book (Qur'an) should act as *Imam* for the people in prayer; but if they are equally versed in reciting it, then the one who has the most knowledge regarding the *sunna* (practices of the prophet); if they are equal regarding the *sunna*, then the earliest of them to emigrate; if they emigrated at the same time, then the oldest of them..." (Ibn Hajr: 1993:92).

From the above saying of the Prophet, it can be discerned that the qualification for leadership in ritual prayer is hierarchical. The most preferred to lead the prayer should be the one most versed in the recitation of the Qur'an, then the one versed in Prophetic practices, then the earliest to emigrate and finally the one oldest in age. Perhaps it is this latitude given by the Prophet of Islam regarding the qualification for leading the ritual prayer that accentuates the controversy in Dagbon as to who qualifies to be called an *Afa*.

From the above saying of the Prophet, it is clear that knowledge of the principles and precepts of Islam is vital to the qualification for leading and directing the affairs of Muslims. In a related saying of the Prophet, he specifically states that his heirs are the knowledgeable. Hazrat Abu Darda relates that he heard the Holy Prophet say: "...the learned are heirs of the Prophets, and the Prophets do not leave any inheritance in the shape of dirhams and dinars (wealth), but they do leave knowledge as their legacy..." (An-Nawawi: n.d:658-659).

Even so, controversies remain in Dagbon as to what level of learning one requires in order to be considered an *Afa* and what type of knowledge one is required to obtain. Even though in Dagbon today the term *Afa* is also loosely used as a term of honour and reverence for the elderly and respected in society, it is its use in relation to the guardians of Islamic lore that this paper concerns itself about.

This paper will trace the possible etymological derivations of the term *Afa* and also the concept of Muslim 'priesthood' as it existed in the Mali and Songhay empires and draw parallels with Dagbon. This is because Dagbon is said to have been islamised by itinerant Muslim holy men from the Mali and Songhay empires (Hiskett: 1984:122). The various roles of the *Afa* will be considered and a comprehensive definition of the term will be offered.

#### Some Definitions of *Afa*

Abdulai Iddrisu defines the term *Afa* to mean "one whose responsibility it is to enlighten the community on Islam through teaching at all levels of the Qur'an schools and organizing *tafsir*-the mass education method, where their individual interpretation of the Qur'an and *Hadith* (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) is made clear (Iddrisu:1997:91)

P. J. Ryan also refers to an *Afa* as a Muslim cleric. He explains further, that *Afanema* are, only male Muslims, foreign or indigenous whose activities are described in the sources primarily as religious; Imams, Muezzins, Qur'an Reciters, Jurists, Scholars (Ryan:1997:8).

According to Afa Abdul-Rashid Awal of Yendi, the word *Afa* is a corruption of *Khalifa*. *Khalifa* means vicegerent, deputy or representative. It first occurred in Muslim terminology in Q: 2:30 when Allah is reported to have told the angels that He was placing on earth, one who shall be His *Khalifa* - deputy, vicegerent or representative (Personal Communication: 2 April 1999).

It however came into prominent use in the years immediately following the death of the Prophet, when those who were elected to lead the Muslim community were designated as his *Khalifas* - deputies, vicegerents or representatives. From then on those who are perceived to be guardians of the Muslim flock have been referred to as the Prophet's representatives, a job that is today performed by *Afanema* in Dagbon.

Afa Issah Mohammed, a Dagomba *Afa* who hails from Kumbungu in the Northern Region but resides in Accra, agrees with Afa Rashid that the word *Afa* comes from *Khalifa*. Afa Issah

however adds that, the Prophet's role in society was principally to teach the Qur'an and serve as a mercy to the people. (Q: 9:61). By mercy he means that, it was the Prophet's duty to help the people to solve their economic, political, social, moral and emotional problems, so as to help them improve on their situation (Personal Communication: 5 May 1999).

He adds, however, that the Prophet was principally a Prophet of religion. Therefore he found mainly religious and spiritual based solutions to the economic, political, social, moral and emotional problems of the people. In a nutshell, he used the Qur'an to administer to the total well being of the people. To him therefore, anybody who is capable of doing this is representing the Prophet and therefore an *Afa*.

To Imam Husain Rashid of Tamale, the word *Afa* comes from *Alafa* - to write, writing in the sense of authorship (Personal Communication: 27 December 1998). An *Afa* according to Imam Rashid from its etymology refers to one who writes in teaching the Qur'an at all levels of the Islamic educational ladder. It also includes mystics and diviners who heal their patients of their ailments by writing verses of the Qur'an on slates and washing it out for the patient to drink. Sometimes these verses are written on pieces of paper, which are sewn into talismans and given to the patient to either hang around the neck or wear around the waist.

From the above etymological derivations of the word *Afa* it is clear that the core function of the *Afa* is the dissemination of the Islamic knowledge and heritage. The *Afa* by virtue of his specialised training has knowledge of Islam, which ordinary Muslims do not have. In Islam much value is placed on the dissemination of knowledge as the above quoted *hadith* (saying of the Prophet) states. The Prophet is also reported to have said that the best of the Muslims are those who learn the religion and teach it to others (An-Nawawi: n.d:659).

The fact that the Prophet Muhammad attached considerable importance to the transmission of the most indispensable elements of knowledge may be inferred from the conditions under which he released prisoners of war after his victory at Badr. The Battle of Badr is the first of the three major battles that the Prophet fought against the Makkans after his migration to Madina. This was in 624 C.E. After the Battle of Badr, Qurayshi captives who were found to be learned were made to teach the boys of Madina to read and write, and this service counted as their ransom. Ten boys were assigned to each Qurayshi captive who was able to give the required instruction. As soon as the pupils had attained the stipulated degree of progress, their teachers were set free (Al-Mubarakpuri: 1996:231)

The saying of the Prophet and the action after Badr indicate that Islam thrives on the ability of knowledgeable people and their capacity to transmit aspects of the religion to others. Otherwise, they become in the words of the Qur'an, "like a donkey laden with books." (Q: 62:5). An *Afa* is therefore not just one who has learnt Islam or the Qur'an, but one who teaches it to others. It is in consideration of this core function that Abdulai Iddrisu concludes that an *Afa* is one whose responsibility it is to enlighten the community.

However, this definition is not comprehensive enough and does not adequately capture a phenomenon as bewildering as that of the *Afa*. Abdulai Iddrisu's definition portrays the *Afa* only as a teacher of Islam, either through the Qur'an school or through *Tafsir*. This does not take into consideration the equally important function of the *Afa* - that of helping the people to find meaning in life and to come to terms with the vicissitudes of everyday living. For the Dagomba Muslim, the world is a terrifying wilderness. It therefore requires a guide, who has divine sanction. That guide is the *Afa*. The *Afa* provides this guidance by serving as a professional man of prayer, who by virtue of his nearness to God, best elicits divine sympathy on behalf of the people.

P.J. Ryan's definition of *Afa* includes *Imams*, *Muezzins*, Qur'an Reciters, Jurists, and Scholars. The implication of this definition is that, anybody who performs the role of *Imam*, *Muezzin*, Qur'an Reciter, Jurist or Scholar is an *Afa*. This generalization is not accurate. Indeed, an *Afa* can play the role of *Imam*, *Muezzin* or Qur'an Reciter at certain times. For instance a *Muezzin* is one who calls the faithful to prayer. This involves repeating the sentences of the *Khalimat Shahada* (the confession of faith) twice each and adding a specific invitation to the faithful to come to prayer and prosperity. This is done in a loud voice, mostly through but not limited to public address systems by one chosen to do so. This fellow does not need any specialised knowledge to perform this function. Indeed the *Afa* of a community hardly performs this role. Perhaps it would have been more appropriate to say that the *Afa* as the repository of knowledge in Islam is capable of performing various roles at various times depending on the needs of the community.

Besides, P.J Ryan's contention that *Afanema* are "only male Muslims" is not accurate. Today a number of women, especially in Dagbon, have joined the 'priestly' class of Islam and perform a number of 'priestly' functions except leading the daily congregational prayers.

Afa Rashid's assertion that the *Afa* is the representative of the Prophet is also less accurate. While it is true that the *Afa* is considered the representative of the Prophet in the community, the question of how one qualifies, as a representative of the Prophet has not been answered.

Afa Issah of Kumbungu seems to have touched on one of the core functions of the *Afa*: that of administering to the all round needs of the people. Imam Husain Rashid on the other hand restricts the definition of an *Afa* to the functions of teaching in the Qur'an school and healing. Again this is a narrow definition that leaves out other equally important functions that the *Afa* plays in the economic, social and moral fields.

The weakness with the definitions of *Afa* cited is that, none considers all the activities of the *Afa*. Such narrow definitions do not do justice to the phenomenon, especially as it pertains in Dagbon. All the definitions examined above cite some of the activities of the *Afa*. Ideally however, the *Afa* must have the comprehensive qualities embraced by the various definitions. Practically however, no one *Afa* performs all the activities that the term embodies. However the important point to note about all these definitions examined so far is that, the *Afa* is one whom the people look up to as spiritual and religious guide.

#### **The Phenomenon in the Mali and Songhay Empires**

Before one can arrive at a conclusive definition of an *Afa* in Dagbon, it would be prudent to examine the concept, as it existed in the Mali and Songhay empires. This is because there is a conversion story that attributes the introduction of Islam in Dagbon to a Wangara Muslim holy man who came from Mali and Songhay empires (Hiskett: 1984:122)

To this end, it is prudent to briefly discuss the emergence and role of Muslim 'priests' in the Mali and Songhay empires. This would help us understand better what the core roles of the Muslim 'priests' were in those empires, and therefore enable us arrive at a concise definition of the term as it relates to Dagbon. This is because having come from these empires, the Islam of Dagbon bears a lot in common with the Islam of those empires.

According to Al-Bakri, the first time that those considered as spiritual and religious guides in the Mali and Songhay empires began to influence the lives of the people, was when they got afflicted by a drought (Kitab al-Masalik: 1913:175). The people resorted to their traditional method of petitioning divine help, which are cattle sacrifices to no avail. It is reported that the king at that time had as his guest a devout Muslim. This devout Muslim volunteered to pray to avert the disaster, on condition that the king would convert to Islam. To this, the king agreed

and together with the king, the devout Muslim offered the Muslim petitionary prayer for rain, a ritual which they went through for most part of the night. This legend has it that, no sooner had the day broken, than God sent his rain on the people. Thereafter the king destroyed the state idols and converted to Islam.

Three important points in this story are worth noting in an attempt to deduce the role of those who can be considered religious and spiritual guides of the people. First, the devout Muslim did not attempt to proselytise openly until the king approached him for help, after traditional means of seeking divine help failed. Presumably, the prayers of petition which they performed for the rain was the *Salat al-Istisqa* the Muslim petitionary prayer for rain. It consists of two *raka't* (cycles) of prayers.

The second point of note is that the Muslim 'Priest's' prayer is almost magical. He obtains answers for his request as quickly as the answers are required. Thirdly, the role of the Muslim 'Priest' becomes even more crucial when the people face social, and economic problems, and not only spiritual ones.

A similar conversion story can be found in Jenne, a territory under the Songhay Empire. According to Al-Sa'di, the king of Jenne, Sultan Konboro converted to Islam towards the end of the nineteenth century when the prayer of 4,200 devout Muslims helped him to realise his heart's desires. Sultan Konboro is reported to have summoned the 4,200 Muslims and asked them to pray in respect of three things: first of all, that God might give comfort and solace to all who flee their homelands to Jenne. Secondly, that more non-natives might dwell in the city than natives. Finally, he prayed that those who come to Jenne with their merchandise might find the patience to sell to natives at very low prices. The devout Muslims prayed, and the requests were granted. The king is reported to have converted to Islam thereafter (Al-Sa'di:1964:4).

"The Kano Chronicle" also records this mystical prayer function of Muslim 'Priests' and holy men in Kano. The king of Kano, Yaji, who reigned between 1349 and 1385, is believed to be the first ruler of Kano to perform the Muslim worship. He is said to have converted when a Wangara Muslim 'Priest' prayed for his victory in battle (Al-S'adi:1964:4)

It would therefore seem that, the Muslim 'Priest' emerged in the Malian and Songhay societies as a religious and spiritual guide owing to his special skill in petitionary prayer that did not fail

in bringing relief to the people and the king. The foremost impact of Islam in West Africa has therefore been pragmatic. Its prayer worked in the style and context of Muslim ritual worship.

To this day, this holy man who is a specialist in petitionary prayers is still known as *Afa* by the Wangara even though in recent times, *Karamoko* has been in more prominent use.

In Dagbon, the term *Karimogu* is used to refer to an *Afa* who shows exceptional capacity in understanding or solving a difficult religious question. This is an obvious corruption of the Wangara term *Karamoko*.

The above shows that it is therefore not the ideal Islam of egalitarian worship that originally attracted West Africans to Islam. West Africans perceived Islam as the prayer of gifted holy men who were capable of writing and healing and making amulets for others (Levtzion: 1973:51-54). The egalitarian Islam is the one that teaches that none is capable of interceding for another in the sight of God and that all humans have an equal voice before Allah, who answers the call of all who call upon him.

#### **The Muslim 'Priest' in Dagbon**

Muslim 'priests' continue to play a great role in the consolidation of thrones of both Muslim and Traditionalist rulers in whose service they are employed. In Gonja land for example, there are still court Imams in the court of every Gonja chief. They are known as *Sakpare* and are responsible for the spiritual needs of the chief (Levtzion: 1984:121). The same applies in the case of the Dagomba and the Wala. In Dagbon today, the court Imam of the paramount chief of Dagbon, (Yar-na) is believed by some chroniclers and historians to be a descendant of the Wangara Muslim 'priest' who converted Na Zangina to Islam in the early eighteenth century that paved the way for the spread of Islam in Dagbon (Wilks:1965:90).

According to Ivor Wilks, Na-Zangina was not only taught how to pray by Sabali Yar-na (the 'priest' who converted him) but that Sabali Yar-na made Dagbon prosperous with the aid of the Qur'an. According to Ivor Wilks ... there were no traders on the main roads to Dagomba...the roads opened and many traveled by them... (Wilks: 1965:90).

There are other conversion stories that trace the islamisation of Dagbon to the Hausa (Hiskett: 1984:122). These were mainly Borno traders who engaged in the cola trade with Salaga in the Northern Region of Ghana. These Hausa traders were less tolerant of the mixing of Islamic and Traditionalist practices that characterized the Islam of the Wangara. This must have been as a result of the Jihads in Hausa land whose purpose was to rid Islam of Muslim 'priests' who

Osman Dan Fodio described as *Ulama al-Sui* (venal Imams) who allowed the unlawful mixing of Islam and Traditionalist modes of worship. Levtzion for instance records one incidence in which a Dagomba functioned both as shrine priest and Imam (Levtzion: 1968:87). This Hausa brand of Islam was to be re-introduced into Dagbon as the Wahabiyya reform movement, which traces its roots to the teachings of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, the purist and fiery fighter against syncretism, whose alliance with the Saud family gave birth to the Wahabiyya reform movement. The Wahabiyya reform movement is the ruling religious ideology in Saudi Arabia today.

As a representative of the Prophet, the *Afa* must be capable of intervening on behalf of the people, through his petitionary prayers. The need for the *Afa* to find an appropriate remedy for the problems of the people in the course of time led the *Afa* to resort to divination as a way of finding out which solution best suited a particular problem.

To the Dagomba therefore an *Afa* is one who is learned in the principles of the Qur'an, *hadith*, *ijma*, *qiyas*, *ijtihad* and other sources of Islamic law. He must not only be learned in these principles, but he must teach these in the *makaranta*, and organize *tafsir* sessions to expound on the meaning of the Qur'an. He may also be one who is capable of intercessory prayer and versed in the art of divination. This was the uncontested definition of the term until the late 1940s.

#### **Afa Ajura and the disagreements about definition**

Controversy arose as to the definition of the term *Afa* and therefore who qualifies to wear the tag of *Afa* in the 1940s when the late Afa Yussif Ajura broke away from the Tijaniyya fraternity in Tamale.

Afa Yussif Ajura was so called because he had lived in Ejura in the Ashanti Region most of his life. It is not clear what led to his break away from the Tijaniyya fraternity. Adherents of the Tijaniyya fraternity say that he broke away as a result of political differences. According to them, Afa Yussif Ajura got involved in the politics of Kwame Nkrumah's Convention People's Party (CPP) to the chagrin of the leadership of the fraternity.

Adherents of the Wahabiyya fraternity on the other hand attribute Afa Yussif Ajura's break away to his realisation that certain practices of the Tijaniyya amounted to *bid'a* (innovation) which according to a saying of the Prophet is abominable (An-Nawawi:n.d:40)

The focus of the late Afa Ajura's campaign was divination, saint and hero worship. He argued that divination is unislamic, quoting the Prophet to buttress his point.

Narrated Aisha, I heard Allah's apostle saying, the angels descend in the clouds and mention this or that matter decreed in the heaven. The devils listen stealthily to such a matter, and come down to inspire the sooth-sayers with it, and the latter would add to it one hundred lies of their own (Al-Bukhari: 1971: Vol 4:291-292).

It is important to state that the campaign that was launched by Afa Yussif Ajura was part of the wave of Islamic revival that had engulfed the entire West Africa region. From the late 1940s, most of the students who had gained scholarships to study in Saudi Arabia and Al-Azhar in Egypt from various West African countries were returning home and carrying with them the Wahhabi religious ideology which is the ruling religious ideology in Saudi Arabia. The Wahhabi religious ideology is premised on the uncompromising unity of God to the exclusion of any intermediary. It teaches that humans should send their petitions to God directly. It therefore regards the intercession of diviners as *bid'a* (innovation) which is inconsistent with the pure teachings of Islam as instituted by the Prophet Muhammad. There was therefore a wave of reformism that had engulfed West African Islam, especially in countries such as Mali, Senegal, Guinea, the Gambia and also Northern Nigeria.

Afa Yussif Ajura therefore called on the people of Dagbon to shun the *Afanema* who dabble in divination. Indeed he declared that anybody who dabbled in divination was not worthy of the title *Afa*. After years of consistent denigration of divination, the late Afa Ajura succeeded in getting quite a sizable number of *Afanema* to renounce divination as part of their activities of providing guidance to Allah's flock. This has caused a split in the class of *Afanema*. Quite a large number however still maintain divination as part of their work of instructing the people in God's word. This has necessitated a distinction between those who engage in divination and those who do not. Thus, those who engage in divination are called *Afa Tibrisi* (plural) and *Afa Tibrigu* (singular).

This is obviously a corruption of the Arabic word *tibb*. *Tibb* in Arabic means medicine. Thus these *Afanema* who engage in divination are so called because they find remedies to people's problems which include physical ailments. Indeed some of them even run clinics that purport to cure all sorts of ailments. Thus in finding an antidote to people's ailments, he basically serves as a medicine man.

**The two types of *Afanema***

Islam was introduced into a Dagomba setting, where traditionalist agents of the sacred utilised skills of control over nature and offered sacrifices for the solution of problems. In the emergence, rise and development of Islam in Dagbon, *Afanema* have in many respects contested with adherents of traditional worship. Thus the activities of *Afa Tibrisi* have in a large measure, contributed to the preservation of the traditional Dagomba for Islam. I.M Lewis explains the successful spread of Islam in Africa in the following words: "...in the process of islamisation of traditional beliefs, the most important aspect of the Muslim religious phenomenology which has facilitated its initial impact and appeal...is its true catholic recognition of the multiplicity of mystical powers...as long as God's lofty pre-eminence is not compromised..." (Lewis: 1969:60).

The activities of *Afa Tibrisi* has thus helped in converting and preserving Dagombas for Islam, by offering them an alternative mode of knowing the divine will. *Afa Yussif Ajura* however rejected any such adaptation. He proclaimed that any such adaptation is likely to result in a reversion to traditionalist modes of worship.

*Afa Ajura* and his class of *Afanema* who mostly belong to the Wahabiyya sect in Islam therefore regard all adaptation as *bid'a* or innovation. They quote the Prophet as saying that, "beware of innovation, for every innovation is going astray and going astray leads to the hell fire" (An-Nawawi: n.d:40). This category of *Afanema* I shall designate as reform minded. Those who engage in divination shall be referred to as accommodating.

The accommodating *Afa* also puts himself forth as a professional man of prayer, whose prayer is potent. In the opinion of reform minded *Afanema* however, we are all equal in the eyes of God and therefore there is no need for a special man of prayer to intercede on our behalf. We all must pray by ourselves and directly to God. To the reform minded *Afanema* therefore it is wrong for the accommodating *Afa* to claim that by his petitionary prayer, he can avert a misfortune on behalf of his client.

In years gone by, the accommodating *Afa* used to live and function in communities, which were less sophisticated. Through out Dagbon, the accommodating *Afa* lived in the "shanty-town". This was perhaps due to the fact that majority of those who patronised their services as diviners and professional men of prayer were those who belonged to the lower rungs of society. They were mostly farmers, petty traders, market women and the unemployed youth. The accommodating *Afa* generally reads little Arabic or English.

Today the situation is different. Indeed many of the accommodating Afa live in plush residences with all the modern gadgets and furniture. Their clientele base has also changed dramatically. Indeed, all accommodating *Afanema* interviewed by this researcher said that among their clientele today are those who work in various government departments all over the country who due to the demands of their work, cannot always come to them to relate their problems.

In the fraternity of *Afa Tibrisi*, one assumes the title of *Afa* when one is able to recite the Qur'an skillfully. This also includes memorization. One would also study a few Arabic and Islamic classics. The popular ones in Dagbon are, *Hidayatul Muta'abid Asalik*, written by Shaykh Abdul-Rahman Al-Akhdari, *Dural Al-Bahiya*, written by Shaykh Abdul-Bari Al-Ashmawi Al-Rufai and *Muqadimatul Izziya Lil Jama'a Al-Azhariya*, written by Abil Hassan Ali Al-Maliki Al-Shadhili. They are popularly known as *Akhdari*, *Ashmawi* and *Izziya* respectfully within the Muslim fraternity in Ghana. These are books on Islamic jurisprudence and treat topics on ritual purity, the correct method of saying the *salat* (the Muslim ritual prayer) and the proper observance of the five pillars of Islam. These are topics that have to do with humankind's relationship with God.

*Izziya* goes beyond humankind's relationship with God to discuss topics that have to do with humankind's relationship with other humans. It discusses topics on inheritance, family law and trade. Thus a student who completes a thorough study of these classics in addition to a fluent recitation of the Qur'an qualifies to teach other students and is thus conferred with the title of *Afa*. The Qur'an schools ran by most of the *Afa Tibrisi* only teach children the art of recitation and memorization of the Qur'an.

The *Afanema* who reject divination are more sophisticated. In fact the majority of them speaks and writes Arabic lucidly. Most of them have had the benefit of studying in Arab lands. However, only a few of them are able to speak and or write in English. The few, who are able to speak and write in English, have attained that feat by their own strenuous effort.

This class of *Afanema* set a more difficult criterion by which one can become an *Afa*. Essentially, both groups agree that the basic requirement for being an *Afa* is to teach in the Qur'an schools and *tafsir*. But the reformist or Wahhabi inclined *Afanema* have an extended understanding of what constitutes a study of the Qur'an. In the fraternity of *Afa Tibrisi*, as

soon as one has completed the recitation and memorization of the Qur'an then one is ready to teach it to others.

The memorization does not need to be of the whole Qur'an. The minimum requirement is the last thirty-eight chapters of the Qur'an, which are relatively short in length, poetic and hence easily memorable.

Thus most *Afa Tibrisi* run Qur'an schools. This is in spite of the fact that they possess only a rudimentary knowledge of the Arabic language. However, in addition to recitation and memorisation of the Qur'an, reformist *Afanema* demand that an *Afa* acquires an in depth knowledge of the Arabic language. They argue that, accommodating *Afanema* give a shallow interpretation of the Qur'an because the language of the Qur'an most often has a deeper meaning. That is why they place value on the fact that they have learnt the Arabic language from its source - Saudi Arabia. Indeed, this argument is valid because one needs a great deal of linguistic competence to be able to do a near perfect translation from one language to another. In addition, they state that, an *Afa* must study Islamic law (*Shari'ah*) and the art of proselytisation (*da'wa*).

The distinguishing feature of a reformist *Afa* is therefore, that he has undergone a more rigorous study of the Qur'an and the Arabic language. By study of the Qur'an the reformist *Afanema* do not mean a mere recitation and memorization. It also involves knowledge of why each verse was revealed, the specific question it seeks to answer and whether it is an abrogating or abrogated verse. Indeed there is a whole branch of Qur'anic studies known as *ilm-ul-tafsir* (the science of interpretation of the Qur'an).

The reformists *Afanema* therefore argue that knowledge of the Qur'an is more than mere recitation. This is because the Qur'an itself asserts that the purpose for which it was revealed is for a total transformation of humankind. Merely learning its recitation does not give one a thorough understanding of its teachings.

The reformist class of *Afanema* also require an *Afa* to have an in depth knowledge of Islamic law (*Shari'ah*) and methods of proselytisation. Even though the reformist *Afa* would pray for somebody, he does not put himself forth as a professional man of prayer, whose prayer is efficacious in the solution of problems.

The accommodating *Afa* on the other hand is one who is proficient in the recitation of the Qur'an and has memorised at least thirty-eight chapters of the Qur'an. He has also studied at least the *Akhdari*, *Ashmawi* and *Izziya*. He is a professional man of prayer and engages in divination. He may or may not be proficient in the Arabic language.

There are therefore two major differences between accommodating *Afanema* and reformist *Afanema*. The reformist *Afanema* engage in a more thorough study of Islamic disciplines than do the accommodating. The reformists do not engage in divination, the accommodating do.

By and large they are both referred to as *Afanema* because even in the time of the Prophet, those who had mastered the recitation and memorisation of the Qur'an only, were commissioned to teach what they had learnt to others. One therefore does not need to study the Islamic sciences in-depth before one can be considered an *Afa* and therefore capable of teaching others. One can teach, to the best of one's ability and knowledge. The situation is akin to what pertains in secular education. There are different grades of teachers. In the Prophet's time an elaborate graduation ceremony was organized to climax one's mastery of the recitation and memorisation of the Qur'an. This ceremony was called *Iqlaba* in Makkah and *Takhrija* in the Maghreb (Goldziher: 1960:198).

Besides, Islamic jurisprudence as a properly organised and structured discipline began to take shape only during the Umayyad period, nearly one century after the death of the Prophet (Goldziher: 1960:198). The implication is that, during the time of the Prophet, Islam was taught without jurisprudence as is known today. Therefore one does not necessarily have to acquire knowledge in it before one can be considered an *Afa*.

In the case of divination, its adaptation or rejection does not make one more or less an *Afa*. On the authority of Muawiya Ibn Hakami al-Sulamee, the Prophet is reported to have said: "...There was a Prophet of Allah who used to divine, by Allah, if the divination of any one of you conforms to his, then surely it is accepted" (Shaykh Nasif: 1975:225). This Prophet is believed by Muslim diviners to be Prophet Idris (Enoch).

When interviewed, reformist *Afanema* including Afa Tanko and Afa Yusif of the Ambariyya Islamic School in Tamale argued that, this *hadith* is *Daif*, that is, of weak authenticity. They argued that the Qur'an frowns on and indeed outlaws divination. Therefore, the Prophet could not have sanctioned it. When their attention was drawn to the fact that the Qur'anic verse that outlaws divination (Q:5:90) talks only about divining by arrows and not by sand, they say

that, that is only the letter of the verse but the spirit of the verse outlaws all forms of divination.

Divination by arrows refers to a practice that prevailed in pre-Islamic Arabia by which the people probed the wishes of their gods (Yusuf Ali: 1989:315). It is this practice that the Qur'an condemns. Again this can be likened to other practices that existed in pre-Islamic Arabia like the polytheistic rituals that took place at the *Kaba* which the Prophet condemned but which he replaced with similar ones. For instance pre-Islamic Arabians performed the pilgrimage to the *Kaba* even before the birth of the Prophet. At the inception of Islam, their form of pilgrimage which involves the worship of idols, was condemned but replaced with the *hajj*. In the same way the Prophet may have outlawed divination by arrows and sanctioned other forms of divination as indeed the above quoted *hadith* stipulates.

#### **Women Afanema**

As pointed out earlier, the assertion by P.J Ryan that *Afanema* are "only male Muslims" no longer holds true. Today and in Dagbon in particular, women are joining the class of *Afanema*. In the past, religious authority was concentrated mainly in the hands of men to the total exclusion of women. Women were supposed to be mere recipients of the divine word from men. Even though women had always attended the *makaranta* and attained the same level of proficiency like their male counterparts, they were excluded from the space that would allow them to show case their knowledge.

Today however, that has changed and women are beginning to appear in hitherto male dominated spaces, especially sacred spaces. Thus women have now acquired the title of *Afanema*. Hence it is not now uncommon to hear of Afa Rukaya or Afa Zubaida. Today some of them are beginning to establish institutes for teaching and training other women *Afanema*. In Tamale (the capital of the Northern Region) one such *Afa*, Afa Mariam Alhassan Alolo has set up an institute called the Mariam Womens Institute where she trains other women *Afanema*. The curriculum for the Mariam Womens Institute includes Arabic language, Quranic studies, *Hadith* studies and *Da'wa* training.

Women *Afanema* mostly engage in preaching on radio and in the rural areas, providing counseling services for married couples and mediating and settling family disputes. Thus today the term *Afa* cannot be said to be restricted to males only.

**Conclusion**

Today in Dagbon therefore an *Afa* is one who by virtue of a specialised training in the *makaranta*, (Qur'an school) has acquired a specialised knowledge of Islam. He or she imparts this knowledge to others through the Qur'an schools and *tafsir*. He or she is by virtue of his or her knowledge, also a professional man or woman of prayer whose prayer is efficacious in the solution of problems. He or she may or not be engaged in amulet making and divination. If he or she does, he is called *Afa Tibrigu*. If not, he or she is simply called *Afa*. Both the *Afa Tibrigu* and the *Afa* however, preside over the naming, marriage and death ceremonies of the people. They both also engage in national politics and tend to direct their flock as to which parties they should support, depending on which party in their view has divine sanction.

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