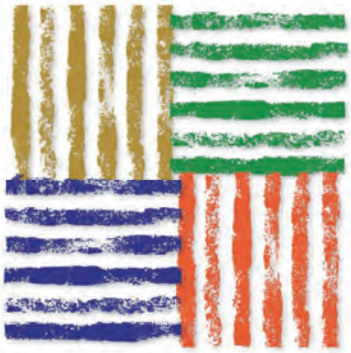

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Merian Institute for Advanced Studies in Africa

RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY AND MODES OF COEXISTENCE IN URBAN WEST AFRICA

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The Question of Religious Authority: Ga Converts and Non-Indigenes in Muslim Identity Politics in Postcolonial Accra

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Abstract
This contribution to the working paper focuses on the religious conversion to Islam of some Ga ethnic people, their role in the Islamic revival and their impact on founding Muslim communities in postcolonial Accra. Ga converts have considered themselves as relevant to assuming religious authority positions in Accra, which was already dominated by Muslims of migrant descent. The issues of representation and integration have been a challenge for Muslims of diverse backgrounds in the Islamic sphere in Accra. The study demonstrates that while the Ga converts have highlighted their unique background in secular education as well as being the indigenes of Accra, the Muslims of migrant origin have questioned the place of converts in religious proselytization.

Key words: Islam, Ga ethnic group, Accra, Ghana, migrant, religious authority

Résumé
La présente contribution à ce document de travail porte sur la conversion à l'Islam de certains membres de l'ethnie Ga, leur rôle dans le renouveau islamique et leur impact sur la création de communautés musulmanes à Accra durant la période postcoloniale. Les convertis Ga se considéraient comme aptes à assumer des fonctions d'autorité religieuse à Accra, qui était déjà dominée par des musulmans issus de l'immigration. La question de la représentation et de l'intégration a été un défi pour les musulmans d'origines diverses dans la sphère islamique d'Accra. L'étude montre que si les convertis Ga mettent en avant leur expérience unique en matière d'éducation laïque et le fait qu'ils sont originaires d'Accra, les musulmans issus de l'immigration remettent en question la place des convertis dans le prosélytisme religieux.

Mots-clés: Islam, ethnie Ga, Accra, Ghana, migrants, autorité religieuse

This study explores religious diversity in the city of Accra, focusing on the struggles for religious authority among the heterogeneous Muslim community. Thereby it provides an account of diversity within diversity which sheds a particular light on its political aspects. Conceptually, my analyses of disputes over religious authority involving Ga converts and non-indigenous Muslims in Accra are guided by a focus on migration and territoriality dynamics. As Ibrahim and Sieveking point out in the introduction of this issue, migrants are significantly contributing to the development of the diverse religious landscape and the heterogeneous social tissue of African cities. They are blending different cultural forms, practices, and socio-material components into their daily lives and form shifting minority and majority constellations through their coexistence with the native population in a given urban space. However, disagreements over authority can still arise and result in conflict, as observed between groups of Muslim 'migrants' from northern Ghana and other countries of the subregion and indigenous Ga 'converts' in

Accra, which manifests through Muslim leadership contests and leads to religious territorialisation in the same city. As I show in the course of the paper, the strategies of the groups involved in these spatial and political struggles are encompassing Muslim organisations as important elements of religious infrastructure.

The Muslim community in Accra since the early twentieth century was composed of Muslims of migrant origin on one hand and the indigenous Ga population on the other hand. The interplay between these two groups was characterized by tension over the question of religious authority, resulting in the politicization of Muslim identities. The implications of this development on religious co-existence and integration of Muslims of diverse backgrounds has not been the subject of academic discourse. Accra is the capital city of Ghana and serves as a model of cosmopolitanism where diverse people including religious communities encounter each other and co-exist. While the majority of its inhabitants are Christians, the Muslim community represents the second largest religious group, which includes the Ga Muslims. The Muslim demography in Accra further illustrates its global character with some Lebanese, Syrians and Middle Eastern and Asian nationals who socialize and inspire Islamic revival. This heterogeneous demographic composition indicates that the majority of the Muslim popularation in Accra are people of migrant origin (both from northern territories and neighbouring sub-regions), while the Ga Muslims represent the indigenous population of Accra. The Ga Muslims, however, are averse to people of migrant origin monopolising religious authority in the land over which they are the traditional custodians. The ensuing milieu saw the politicisation of identities from both backgrounds in a bid to discredit their opponents.

Analysing the origin of Islam in Accra illustrates the pioneering roles played by migrant Muslims in its proselytization. While the religious activities of these migrant Muslims led to the conversion of some Ga natives, the former still monopolised the authority of Muslim leadership. This development has generated considerable tension among the Muslim community of diverse backgrounds. Despite their late embrace of the Islamic faith, Ga Muslims criticised the extent of their marginalisation in Muslim councils in Accra. While this raises questions about the place of ethnicity in the representation of Muslim leadership, it demonstrates the significance of religious authority to Muslims of diverse backgrounds.

The seeming dominance of Muslims of migrant origin in religious authority in Accra has degenerated into heightened intra-Muslim differences, resulting in the politicization of identities. Dissatisfied with the monopolization of religious authority by Muslims of migrant background, the indigenous Ga started to oppose the former by labelling them in a discrediting manner as migrants, while the latter equally responded by identifying their opponents as converts. These pejorative labels, which provided the yardstick for opposing groups to contest religious authority, offer a useful basis for analysing intra-Muslim power struggles in Accra. I argue that the power struggles and differences between Muslims of migrant background and

the indigenous Ga Muslims has undermined intra-Muslim co-existence and affected the search for sustainable governance among Muslims in Accra.

This study draws attention to Ga Muslim converts by analysing their interaction with Muslims of migrant origin in Accra. The paper further analyses the struggles that Ga Muslim converts experience in creating their own Islamic community in Accra. This illustrates the crucial roles that the indigenous Ga Muslims played in promoting religious infrastructures and negotiating religious, social and political influences in Accra. The paper thus contributes to the issue of migration and mobility, but from the perspective of those who receive the newcomers. Thereby it also sheds light on the shifting nature and the highly political dynamics of majority-minority constellations concerning relations between as well as within religious groups. By highlighting the religious diversity among Muslims in Accra, the paper demonstrates how this interaction has generated power struggles over religious authority and the ensuing politicization of identities.

Beginning in 1900, some natives of Accra, for diverse reasons, embraced the Islamic faith through the religious activities of migrant Muslim traders in Accra. While the conversions of these Ga people have reconfigured the religious demography with respect to other natives of Accra, their engagement with the larger Muslim community offers a useful basis to analyse Muslims' quest for sustainable governance through the Islamic councils and the challenges of intra-Muslim integration it has generated.

By the first half of 20th century, the Muslim community in Accra was shaped by the encounters between indigenous converts and immigrant Muslims whose backgrounds were shaped by contrasting social profiles and demographic dynamics. While the immigrants were steeped in traditional Madrasah as well as being merchants and traders, the indigenous converts were Western-educated and familiar with the secular political milieu. These contrasting backgrounds of the Muslim groups have influenced their different aspirations for Islamic reform and representation of Muslims in the public.

Moreover, Ga Muslim converts not only contested Muslims of migrant origin on religious authority on account of being non-natives of Accra, but they differed with their opponents on the focus of Islamic reform and representation of Islam in public. This raises the question of whether people's social profiles and forms of education may have a bearing on how Islamic reform could be realised or not, a topic which has attracted scholarly debates, as analysed below.

Converts and contestation of religious authority

Contemporary scholarly works have been analysing the status of converts in religious traditions that they have embraced and the roles that they can play in religious authority. The unending nature of this debate points to the relevance of the question of whether converts can play roles in religious authority (Jensen 2006; Hervieu-Leger 2000). What is, however, obvious is that converts are newcomers in religion and may not be acquainted with its traditions. This notwithstanding, the existing literature on converts and religious conversion highlights two paradigms in shaping the debate: conversion narratives and the challenges that converts encounter in their new faiths (Lahmar 2018; Hamid 2011). Interestingly, recent scholarly interest has shifted from analysing the conversion narrative to examining how converts are coping with challenges in the new religious tradition that they embrace. Some studies have gone further to demonstrate how some Muslims have doubted the authenticity of religiosity of some converts (Roald 2012).

Cedric Jourde (2017) was, however, right when he argued that converts play marginal roles in the religious tradition that they chose. This is because they face the challenges of social construction, as they are viewed as newcomers and thus accorded followership status relative to those who have embraced and propagated the religious tradition in a given community. While this underlines an inbuilt hierarchy based on the chronological order in which people convert to a particular religion, it raises questions about the place of newcomers who learn and master the religious resources for achieving authority. In another study, Frank Peter (2006) argues that converts also face the crisis of socialization in the religious environment including severing of ties, isolation and ex-communication from families and relatives.

While previous scholarly works have focused their analyses on the challenges that converts cope with, they overlook how converts can not only play roles but contest religious authority. Based on archival sources and interviews conducted during fieldwork in Accra from 2017–2022, I analyse in the following the religious activities of Ga converts who contested the over-whelming representation of Islam by non-natives in the Muslim sphere in Accra on the question of religious authority. My analysis focuses on the transition from the late colonial period to the first few decades of Ghana's independence.

Beginning from the early postcolonial period of the late 1950s, the Muslim community was characterized by the formation of Muslim councils ostensibly designed by one regime or the other to win the hearts and minds of Muslims in their quest for political mobilization. However, the overwhelming demography of Muslims in Accra being of migrant origin has enabled them to represent the majority of Muslims in these councils. Interestingly, the early postcolonial period was not only characterized by a series of coup d'états in Ghana, but also saw the politicization of the identities of Muslims of migrant origin by the successive regimes (1950s–1970s). In particular, the repressive policies of Kwame Nkrumah (1957–1966) of selec-

tively labelling his political opponents as aliens to justify their deportation were followed by mass deportations instituted by Kofi Abrefa Busia (1969–1972) on account of Ghana's economic crisis. This included large numbers of Muslims, many of whom had immigrated to Ghana from the subregion. Undoubtedly, these policies have popularized labelling Muslims as "others" and offered a basis for power contestation in postcolonial Ghana. Consequently, the Ga Muslim converts exploited these politicized labels to fight against non-natives on the Islamic councils. Additionally, my research aims to examine the motivations and aspirations of the contending Muslim groups on Islamic reform and representation of Islam in the public sphere. This study thus analyses the struggles of Ga Muslims engaged in Muslim politics as well as their quest for representation in Muslim councils in the context of their aspiration of Islamic reform in Accra.

Conversion to Islam and intra-Ga Muslim societies

While the Muslim community emerged in Accra after the nineteenth century through groups of Afro-Brazilians and Donko slaves who had been re-deported from the Americas back to Ghana (Anquandah 2006; Amos and Ayensu 2002), Islamisation occurred among the Ga people in the early twentieth century. Islamisation peaked among the Ga natives in Accra by the end of the colonial period, though it was interlinked with the British colonial policies in two ways. In particular, the British policies of recruiting Muslims from northern Nigeria as its security forces as well as a labour economy based on cocoa farming attracted migrants from neighbouring French West African countries into the Gold Coast. Undoubtedly, these policies provided the catalyst for the growth of Islam in Accra in the colonial period. While the background of Kwashi Solomon is sketchy in both the literature and oral narratives, he was known to be the first Ga to have converted to Islam in Accra in 1900. This was followed by numerous other Ga natives embracing the Islamic religion, converting from either Christianity or indigenous traditional religions.

Individual conversion stories, which I collected during my fieldwork, show how some of the converts abandoned Christianity because they lacked understanding of its tenets, while others had mysterious personal experiences compelling them to convert to Islam. An elderly convert, whose conversion was in the 1940s, narrated, "Whenever I attended the church services, I experienced discomfort and felt hot" (Interview, Ahmed Mensah, 2019). By the 1930s there were significant numbers of Ga natives who had converted to Islam but experienced challenges with their families. Some of these converts were evicted from family homes, while others were intimidated and harassed. Abas Sowah, who had converted in the early 1950s, for example, was evicted from his family house by his stepmother because he adopted the Islamic religion (Interview, Abas Sowah, 2020). The conversion story of Nii Ato Adama, who converted in the late 1930s, is also telling. He narrated how he was virtually rejected by his entire family,

who were traditionalists. He depended on menial jobs in Accra City for survival (Interview, Nii Adama, 2019). Nii Adama is now the chief of Agbon, a community around Amasaman in Accra.

Realising their weakness in terms of family ties, these converts devised measures to protect their newfound religion by founding Muslim societies, formally constituted and officially registered by the state. The earliest of these societies was the Review of Light of the Islamic Mission, founded in 1924, which metamorphosed into Ga Aborigine Muslims Association in 1936 and subsequently transformed into Iti-had Islamiyya in 1946. The latter change of name was to appease the Lebanese Muslim community, who resented being part of a society called "Aborigine". The inclusion of the Lebanese in the Iti-had underscores how material motives with regard to employment and financial support by wealthy business people among the Lebanese population of Accra also bolstered the Islamic revival among the Ga people. Despite the good will that Iti-had Islamiyya initially enjoyed, splinter groups emerged which challenged its authority. The lack of cohesion that Iti-had encountered compelled some Ga Muslim elders led by Mahama Markwei, with the help from a Saudi philanthropist, to found Jam'iyat Islamiyya in 1954. Like Iti-had, Jam'iyat faced challenges in membership mobilisation in Accra because of splinter groups such as Jam'iyat Shuban in 1956 and Muhammadan Institute in 1956, which undermined its aim to promote cohesion (interview, Laryea Markwei, 2022).

The division in intra-Ga Muslim politics became a concern to some elders such as Yakubu Ammah and Yushau Laryea, among others. Consequently, they advocated for the founding of Ghana Muslim Mission (GMM) in November 1957, a few months after Ghana's political independence, to bring all the breakaway groups together and to provide a sense of unity among the converts. At the same time, the united Ga Muslim society started to engage in partisan politics of the newly independent nation.

As natives of Accra, the converts equally founded Muslim cities in order to promote their version of Islamic reform. The earliest of such Ga Muslim settlements was Mabruk (blessing in Arabic), founded by Iti-had Islamiyya in 1935. In the view of Yusuf Okine, "non-Muslims were neither allowed to settle in this community nor trade in things that Islam prohibited" (Interview, Yusuf Okine, 2019). This community is located around the south-western part of Accra and shares boundaries with Soko in the east and Banana Inn in the south. Coincidentally, its northern and western boundaries are surrounded by the Muslim communities of Shukura and Zabarma Line, respectively. Originally, the Zabarma Line was an extension of Mabruk and founded by migrant Muslims from Niger. The early Ga Muslim settlers of Mabruk had encouraged the migrant Zabarma Muslims to settle with them over religious consideration. However, as they grew in numbers and self-awareness, the Zabarma community declared their settlement independent from Mabruk Ga Muslim leadership.

Like Mabruk, Tuba was founded by Ga-adagme converts whose ancestors had migrated from Ningo, a town in the eastern part of Greater Accra in 1942. The word Tuba, meaning 'convert', is both Arabic and Hausa. It is a label that was imposed on these Ga-Adagme Muslims by the Hausa and was accepted. Tuba is located in the extreme southwestern part of Greater Accra and closer to Kasoa, which serves as the starting boundary of the central region. Tuba is bordered to the north by Machigani and to the west by Kasoa. It further shares boundaries to the east with Kakraba and to the south Kokrobite. Imam Bunyamin Nowarty Boboji, intimated in an interview that "our elders thought of establishing a pure Islamic community where non-Muslims are not welcome, including the ban on alcoholic drinking spots". Dar-Islam (the Land of Islam, in Arabic) was founded in 1958 by Mahama Markwei, the leader of Jam'iyat Islamiyya. However, in the perspective of Laryea Markwei, Dar-Islam has become a shadow of its past, as most of the converts have either become "lapsed Muslims" or reverted back to Christianity (interview, Laryea Markwei, 2019).

Politicisations of Muslim identities in intra-Muslim organisations (1950s–1990s)

While the colonial period of the 1900s–1950s was characterized by conversion of Ga natives and their struggles to establish religious societies and communities, the subsequent decades beginning in the 1950s represented a moment of politicisation of identities. Central to the identity politics in this transition period from colonization to independence was the question whether people of migrant background or converts could lead Islamic organizations. The label of converts was conveniently deployed to denote newcomers in religion, who were depicted as "ignorant of its precepts", while the term migrant was used by the Ga natives to depict their rivals as settlers and aliens in the struggles for religious leadership. Both terms were deployed in a pejorative sense with the aim of undermining their opponents. Beneath the apparent differences in terms of origin of the rivalling groups are questions on representation of Muslims in the public sphere as well as the dimension of Islamic reform. This brings to question the pattern of Islamic reform and Muslim representation prior to the founding of the GMM in 1957.

While the formation of Muslim societies prior to the 1950s demonstrated progressive engagement with the Ghanaian political system through partisan politics since 1934, the leadership of most Muslim institutions were Ulama, who lacked understanding the dynamics of the secular system. The consolidation of the Ga Muslim leadership under the umbrella of the GMM offered new perspectives on Islamic reform and debates on representation of Muslims in the political sphere. This is because the GMM first contested the overwhelming representation of Muslims of migrant descent claiming religious authority. However, since the early 1950s these struggles over religious leadership became entangled with struggles over political constituencies that became apparent with Kwame Nkrumah's decision to disband the Muslim Association Party (MAP), founded in 1934, and instead establish the Ghana Muslim Council

(GMC) in 1958. The MAP had won municipal elections in 1954 and therefore attracted the attention of Kwame Nkrumah and the CPP, who were concerned about the political implication of its activities, potentially undermining Nkrumah's electoral fortunes. Exploiting the political climate of the time, the GMM therefore questioned whether independence was intended to free Ghanaians from all foreign domination including religious organisations (Schildkrout 1974).

On the surface, identity politics during these early days of independence were manifested under the banner of "unity in diversity", and the struggle over representation was fought along the lines of whether converts or persons of migrant descent were qualified to lead religious organizations. Furthermore, beneath this was the question of the quality of leadership, over which the converts differed with the groups they labelled as migrants. Converts asserted their entitlement to leadership on the basis of their privileged access to secular education, which they intended to bring to bear in the leadership structures and the representtation of Islam in public.

In the following decades, conflicting identity politics became manifest when the Ghana Muslim Representative Council (GMRC) was founded in 1973 as an umbrella organization for the diverse Muslim councils. Initially, the GMRC was formed to unify the splinter Islamic groupings such as GMM, Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (SCIA) and the Ghana Muslim Community (GMC). To provide a sense of inclusiveness in this new organization, the leadership of the GMRC was to rotate among these component bodies. However, with the exception of the GMM, most of these groupings were composed of traditional Ulama, who were at the same time representatives of people of migrant descent. But the perception that GMM would have its turn in the rotational formula was, however, challenged by their opponent on account of the fact that they were converts.

When Dauda Otoo from the GMM was elected as the President of the GMRC in 1977, the migrant-led organization of the GMC withdrew from the organisation, arguing that he was a convert. Since Dauda Otoo was at that time the leader of the GMM, he also represented the aspiration of Ga converts in national Muslim organizations. Migrant-led organizations questioned his qualification to be a leader in an Islamic organisation. In the view of an anonymous member of the GMC, to be a leader for the Muslim community one must possess extensive knowledge of Islamic sciences to enable the person to drive rulings according to Islamic Shari'ah. In an interview, he asked, "Without the prerequisite knowledge how can someone lead?" in response to my question concerning legitimate leadership (Interview, anonymous, 2018). But leadership qualification in Islam in a secular state like Ghana goes beyond religious credentials – a condition which the migrant leaders overlooked. By contrast, a member of the GMM who wanted to remain anonymous argued that the "migrant Muslims" always view the converts as inferior in spite of their understanding of the secular milieu in Ghana (Interview, anonymous, 2019). He stressed that Dauda Otoo was a director at Ghana's

Custom, now Ghana Revenue Authority, and that Otoo's understanding of Ghana's political system could not be discounted. These controversies suggest that the religious diversity among Muslims, which could be harnessed for empowerment, de facto also questioned Muslims' quest for sustainable governance, as becomes clearer in the following section.

The impact of educational credential on Muslim identity politics

The converts equally question the credentials of immigrants to represent Muslim councils on account of being Madrasah-educated and not understanding Ghana's secular system. This became apparent when the GMC withdrew from GMRC, as mentioned above. In 1984, it founded the United Ghana Muslim Representative Council (UGMRC), under the leadership of Imam Abas Muktari, which highlights the central role traditional Ulama play in Muslim identity politics. However, the question raised by a member of the GMM was how can he [Muktari] represent Muslims in a secular milieu where he lacks the understanding of the system? (Interview, Abdullah Markwie, 2019). As the contestation over religious authority was unending, the GMM appealed to all indigenous Ghanaians to rally behind the leadership of Dauda Otoo (Daily Graphic 1984).

This conflict raises the question of whether the contending groups appreciate how their diversity could be a source of empowerment. Like the Western-educated members of the GMM, immigrant Muslims who possess traditional Islamic education in religious sciences can be useful to Muslim councils if their expertise is harnessed well. The polarization among Muslims on the question of leadership reached its crescendo when youth from the *zongos* demonstrated in support of Imam Abas Muktari, which highlights how the traditionally educated Muslim elites may influence the masses to buy their agenda (Daily Graphic 1977).

Muslims' integration within the Islamic sphere has been a puzzle for lack of common understanding. Since 1985, attempts were made to harmonise the leadership of the GMRC and UGMRC through an accord which birthed the National Islamic Secretariat (NIS) in 1985 as the mother body of all Muslim organizations (Mumuni 1996). However, this did not result in the integration of all Muslims in its leadership structures, partly because of external interferences. The Libyan interference in Islamic organisations is particularly telling. In its bid to draw Muslim councils to its foreign policy agenda, the Libyan government advocated the NIS to be transformed into Federation of Muslim Council (FMC) in 1987. Curiously, Dauda Otoo emerged as the first national coordinator of the newly formed council. However, when Dauda Otoo's health failed, Shomi Williams of the GMRC and GMM became acting coordinator from 1989 to the present. The failure to renew the mandate every three years underscores how the Muslim councils have been appropriated by the Ga converts at the expense of the larger Muslim community. Despite the fact the that Muslim community in Accra outlines its uniqueness of being

composed of people of migrant background and indigenous converts, the community experienced challenges with integration and co-existence due to the struggle for religious authority.

Conclusion

In this study I analysed Ga Muslim converts in the founding of Muslim societies and their struggle for representation in the Islamic sphere and the ensuing politicisation of Muslim identities. I highlighted the struggle between the indigenous Ga Muslims and Muslims of migrant origin over religious authority. This generated a debate as to whether Muslims of migrant origin or converts are more qualified to lead the religious community. My study demonstrates that Ga Muslim converts have negotiated their presence in different directions. As Ga they are part of Accra's original population, but they are a minority among Ga because they have converted to Islam. They are also a minority among Muslims in Accra, because the majority of the Muslim community has a first-, second-, or third generation migrant background, either from other regions in Ghana, mainly the North, or from other countries in the subregion. While Muslims with migrant background have been suspicious regarding how deep the Islamic knowledge of converts can be, Ga Muslim converts have capitalised their expertise based on secular education in order to increase their influence on Muslim organisations, which requires interaction with public administration.

This paper brought to the fore the question of representation and integration of Muslims of diverse backgrounds in the Muslim community in Accra. Muslim organisations as elements of religious infrastructures that are particularly prone to politicisation have thus been an important factor in playing out religious diversity, not only between different religious groups but also among Muslims. In this respect, my study also addresses the complex dynamics of shifting majority and minority constellations within as well as between religious groups and communities. This aspect, which is related to the processes of migration and (physical and social) mobility, is further complicated by the use in local discourses of pejorative labels which aim at minimizing the social status and legitimacy of the respective opponent group. I demonstrate, however, that Muslims' struggles for religious authority have in fact undermined the potential to harness their diversity for the common good of the society. The power struggles among Muslims have equally affected their quest for sustainable governance in establishing a united Muslim council in Accra. Thus, co-existence among Muslims in Accra is quite challenging to achieve.

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