

Aegis Panel 30:

“It’s All about Morals”, Islam and expectations of Social Mobility among Young and Committed Muslims in Tamale, Northern Ghana,

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Visiting Tamale, the regional capital of the Northern region of Ghana in the early 1990s, I was astonished by the eager engagement in Islam, which the young people displayed. When returning to Ghana again in the beginning of the new century, signboards advertised for Islam-related activities, and likewise, Islamic kindergartens, primary and secondary schools, and high schools and universities offered education on all levels. An enormous mosque now covered the hill top of the town and also several smaller, and sophisticated built mosques had become visible along the roadsides. People could be observed gathering eagerly on squares all over town and in the many educational sites to take part in and overhear debates on issues related to Islam. Furthermore, Islam had become a cherished issue of debate in the local radio Savannah, dealing with discussions on how to interpret Islamic law in relation to marriage, inheritance, violence between spouses and other matters related to the daily life of the Dagomba, Gonja and Hausa people in town.

The dominating theme of the debates was the importance of acting according to Islamic morals. Many of the debaters made it clear that in their view, “Islam was all about morals”. As 35 % of the population in Ghana is between 15 and 40 years of age, as approximately 58% of the population in the Northern Region regard themselves as Muslims, and moreover, as the number of Muslims in the town of Tamale surpass these 58%, it is obvious that these religiously mobilised young Muslims constitute an important social factor. When they change their position in relation to religious interpretation, it has social implications.

The aim of this paper is to show which role a reformation of Islamic education have played for making Islamic morals a central point for young Muslims to engage in, in the local context of Tamale, northern Ghana. The concept of moral should be understood as the rules for acting, which are broadly regarded as acceptable in a given society. I will show how moral speech acts have become a new form of religious practise, on par with other Islamic everyday rituals, and how this has had implications for young Muslims as individuals as well as for constituting new kinds of Islamic institutions.

My observations are grounded on 10 months' of anthropological fieldwork in northern Ghana, where I followed young Muslims taking part in public debates, preachings in mosques and in educational institutions, and where I followed their political and social practices meant to signal or symbolise their Islamic moral habitus. Furthermore, I followed the daily teachings in 4 different English/Arabic primary and junior secondary schools, recorded ceremonies, gatherings and preachings, and registered the users, the preachers, the builders and the donors of the Friday mosques in Tamale municipality. Also the life stories of 24 young people were collected, and focus interviews were made with Islamic opinion leaders, religious leaders, Muslim parents, school leaders and teachers of religious and secular matters.

The strengthening and changes in the religious engagement, which I could observe in Tamale, shall be seen in relation to the enormous changes in, rather than the break down of, the social structure of the North Ghanaian society. Up through the 20th century Ghana witnessed that social relations were no longer able to secure the well-being of the individual. At the same time the political agenda was nationalised and globalised, resulting in a far more unequal disbursement of recourses, between Ghana and the West, between Northern and Southern Ghana and internally within the population. Access to radio programmes, television, internet and published media on

the other hand opened up for the acquirement of new kinds of knowledge, making people in Northern Ghana well aware of the developments taking place in southern Ghana, as well as in West Africa, in the Middle East and in the Western World. The population of Northern Ghana became on a more unequal footing in relation to the rest of the world, socially, economically and culturally, but also they became more aware of what is going on in this other world.

The Islamic field of Tamale is predominantly related to four Islamic fractions: the Tijaniyya Sufi Brotherhood have had at least since the 19th century a wide range of local relations to the northern and western part of Africa, - the Ahmadiyya Muslim Mission, rooted in India and having a widely disbursed international network, came to Tamale in the beginning of the 1930s, and the Ahlu Sunna wa al Jama'a strongly inspired by the Saudi Arabian Wahhabi tradition, but also by the political ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood has been locally supported from the 1950's and onwards. The newcomer to the Islamic field of Northern Ghana is a group of Ghanaian and Iranian Shi'a Muslims, supported by the Government of Iran, who established themselves in the 1980s offering agricultural development aid. Recently, this group has there changed its strategy and field, and "the Iranians" are now active establishing free educational institutions, as for example boarding schools.

Two of the Islamic groups of the Northern Region have through the last 30-40 years related themselves to each of their wing within the national and ethnic political hierarchy, whereby two political blocks of power have become visible: one constituted by supporters of the Tijaniyya Sufi Brotherhood, by the liberal political party in government "New Patriotic Party" and by one of Dagomba's royal lineages the Abudu. The other block constituted by the partly reformist, partly traditionalist Ahlu Suna wa al Jama'a, of members of late Nkruma's socialistic party, "the Convention People's Party" and of persons from the other royal lineage, the Andani. The two blocks of power are to be seen as defending the interests of two different classes: those who are

in power, and those who are not. Power in this local community is thus concentrated in institutions, which are dependent of each other, when they are to consolidate themselves. This conjunction of power spheres heightens the importance of the Islamic field for people being outside any power relationships, as the young people most often are in this local context. It is, thus, of great interest for them, when the Islamic field become open for inclusion of newcomers.

From the 1950s onwards the regional and national isolation of the Northern Region in combination with an increase in the interaction between the Middle East and West Africa opened up for a shift in the understanding of Islam by way of introducing a “scripturalist” paradigm. Central for this tradition of religious authority was a rejection of esoteric mysticism. In opposition, the exoteric tradition only accepted that knowledge of the religious texts and of script-based Islamic sciences formed the basis for acquirement of religious authority. By so stating the paradigm introduced a change in the understanding of what constituted Islamic knowledge. From solely accepting religious sciences as legitimate and necessary objects for religious studies, also secular knowledge became an important issue for the religious scholar to engage in. The reason given was that world is created by Allah, and therefore knowledge about the world should be a religious necessity for acknowledged Muslims to be engaged in. This paradigmatic shift has had enormous importance for the development of the Islamic field in Ghana.

The early consequences were seen already from the beginning of the 1960s when recognition of the paradigm changed the understanding of which social groups could acquire religious authority. Formerly religious authority was solely connected to a powerful elitist class of Sufi Muslims, interrelated through trade, ethnicity, lineage and educational networks, through which religious knowledge and blessings were transmitted. In contrary, the “scripturalist” paradigm introduced an ideology of equality to the Islamic field. Hereby a kind of social mobility became

legitimised, ideally limited only by the merits of the individual, no matter sex, ethnic relations or class.

The scripturalist paradigm established certain practices as religious deeds, ideally meant to create Muslim identity: It became essential to engage in knowing and distributing religious texts to coming believers, and to feel responsible for and actively take part in the development of the Muslim community. In order to spread this message, mission activities were given high priority, strengthening relations between Islamic circles in the Middle East and Ghana. From the 1970's onwards, an increase in the number of scholarships offered to young Ghanaian Muslims to Middle Eastern Islamic educational institutions can be noticed. All kinds of Islamic literature flow over the border, and economic means from Middle Eastern donors pay the establishment of mosques, schools, and universities, where courses in Islam-related subjects take place for still more eager students, women as well as men. The underlining of the "scripturalist" paradigm of offering "texts to everybody" and the understanding of secular as well as religious knowledge being Islamic knowledge have implicated that all Muslims must in principle be taught how to read in order to be able to do their own study of the texts. Hence, during the 1980's the Sufi-run Koranic schools have gradually been replaced by Islamic mass educational institutions, which have come into being through collaboration between private school owners, often former local Sufi scholars, and the Ministry of Education, Ghana Educational Service. Today, the Islamic schools offer mass education in religious and secular matters and in 2004 they took care of more than 50% of the primary education offered in Tamale municipality. The Muslim pupils graduate from Islamic primary, junior and senior secondary schools, and thereafter they can prolong their studies in state-sponsored secular and tertiary educational institutions in Tamale or in Islamic universities either in Tamale, in Accra or in Middle Eastern countries, sponsored by private Middle Eastern Muslims or by Middle Eastern states.

As now, it is no exaggeration to estimate that the mass educational institutions have been of uttermost importance for the growing interest for the Islamic field, found among the new generation of Muslim youth. It is here the young Muslims have learned to gain and maintain their interest for religiously legitimate resources. The explanation for the increasing engagement of the youth lies to a large extent in the symbolic value of the religious capital, which through their upbringing in the Islamic schools gradually has changed to become symbolic control. The control lies in the cognitive tools, which each and every person has been given by being brought up in and experiencing this local context. Each human being is to be understood as a unique conglomerate of both common experienced structures and personal, but multiple experiences. The depth of the internalisation of this unique experience is dependent of several conditions: in which period of life and of the length of time it has taken place and to which extent it corresponds with the social, economic and cultural context of the present. The socialising mechanisms, which are the basis of any schooling, were different from one Islamic school to the other, causing the cognitive structure of each child to develop differently in different schools. The associations, which the young people related to their religious schooling, could be heard as arousing feelings of peace and rest, memories of beatings and punishments, of satisfaction when acquiring new knowledge, of being full or hungry, as dinner was served in some schools, of happiness and joy, when meeting with clever, friendly, but also strict, unpredictable, and absent-minded adults. These memories and feelings made me determine the self-perception, self-esteem and self-respect which schooling in each particular type of Islamic school had left in its pupils. Furthermore, when observing the teaching in different Islamic schools at the same class levels, where the reciting the Quran were taught and where the time set aside for religious education was more or less the same, the different types of schooling seemed to create different types of Islamic identities among the Muslim children. These evolved out of differences in school surroundings, in disciplinary methods, and in the teaching situations: some teacher displayed attitudes of total neglect and discouragement, others carelessness, while some teachers took an

enormous and positive interest in the performance of each and every child. Hence, the teaching situations created emotional relationships among teachers and pupils, making the pupils' relationship to the Islamic field dominated by very different and uncontrollable feelings: expanding from fear and inferiority, to feelings of satisfaction and of deep devotion. It was the strength of these positive and negative school experiences, which were established while the Muslims were young children, which still united them, more or less consciously and more or less authoritatively to the Islamic field.

The growing recognition of the “scripturalist” paradigm has instigated that the Islamic field of Tamale has become more polarised and especially the two Sunni groups, the Tijaniyya and the Ahlu Sunna are now in sharp opposition. This can be noticed in regard to discussion of daily politics, local as well as national, and in regard to matters of which rituals, and which Islamic ceremonies to engage in. As it seems, exoteric religious knowledge has gradually come to form the main basis for religious authority. This shift is important when discerning, what the individual Muslim expects to gain in the life hereafter, but it is also decisive for which positions can be traced by the individual in the daily lived life. The Islamic reform ideology seems to attract Muslims with very different backgrounds, of both sexes, though more men than women: students, publicly employed, artisans, farmers, housewives, and unemployed. The majority have been pupils in Islamic schools of the publicly supported kind just mentioned, and they have, are on their way to, or are looking forward to engage in secular education. Most of them do not assign great value to their ethnic identity, most often they are not out of royal families and many are quite outspoken in their wish to be set free of the established Islamic fractions, in which they were brought up. They support the ideology of reform, as it is both articulated within Ahlu Sunna, Ahmadiyya, Shi'a and more seldom within the Tijaniyya, In regard to age, the group of supporters seems wide, though most often the sympathisers are young, - in this context, that is when you are without a spouse, when you are without children, and under all circumstances

when you are below forty of age and your classificatory father is still alive. Thus, men within this age set often find themselves excluded from taking up powerful positions in relation to family, kin and ethnic group and young women are even more stuck in powerless positions, because they have a limited access to articulate themselves in the public sphere. Through offers of new, religiously legitimate and organised access to education, - to political engagement and to taking part in social development aid, the young people have become able to acquire social, cultural and economic capital, which they partly experience, partly expect to exchange inside as well as outside the religious field to personal recognition.

My material shows that the group of young Muslims is on their way to develop the “scripturalist” paradigm in a new direction. The young people have increasingly neither the skills to nor the time to study the religious texts and the strengthening of the young people’s position of power have meant that they are about to establish yet another understanding of what is regarded as religious knowledge. The weight of the “scripturalist” paradigm on both education and social responsibility seem to rescue the reputation of the not that textually learned young Muslims. They seem to be able to maintain their recognition as being respectable Muslims, “proving” their religious engagement by referring to their daily deeds. Pronouncing moral statements, as for example underlining the value for society of being personally able to cope for yourself and take upon yourself the responsibility for the weak, - by underlining the value for society of persons being diligent and goal-oriented, - by describing own interests and choices as modest and therefore being for the sake of the common good, the efforts of the individual are staged as the way to better the common future of the local community. In this way the young Muslims are able to move the symbolic weight from intellectual knowledge to knowledge on Islamic ethics: In practice by uttering moral statements, performed in a ritualised form in the

public space.¹ These forms of performance have an effect both on the performer's image of himself as a moral being and on the understanding of the audience of what actions should be accepted as expressing good morals. Statements as for example " I have chosen to become a school teacher to be able to act as a role model for Muslim women", - "I want to educate as a pilot so as the Ghanaians, who travel to Mecca on hajj can be served by a Muslim," - " I want to become a nurse to make Muslim women able to feel safe, when being hospitalised", - " I feel that we Muslims must act modest and that is why I dress simple and have only few belongings, - "Islam helps me to gain control over my sex, my time and my body, and that is why Islam leads to a civilised society" are all very commonly heard statements. Through these publicly performed speech acts young Muslims create their reputation as being morally responsible and at the same time they establish new norms for how everyday practice, as for example educational choices, gender relationship, or child rearing should be conducted.

Moral statements is thus about to become a part of the language of modernity. This kind of public performance binds the emotions of the young Muslims to the project of modernisation, because moral statements are bound to the young peoples' experience of being either socially accepted or rejected. Hence, the young people experience that the performance of moral statements opens up for new forms of capital, which might lead to new rights. The young Muslims widen the notion of merit by the value of their moral reputation and hereby they become in a better position to take part in the modernisation project. Religious authority still rests for a great part on the charisma of the teacher or preacher, implicating that the power of any religious leader is related to those younger lay people, who recognise this charisma. Thus, there exists a mutual relationship of dependence between any person who seeks a position as religious authority and his supporters and this relationship is always open for negotiation. The young

¹ In short I define the notion of ritual performance as acting for an audience in formal as well as informal gatherings, where it can be observed that social categories are agreed on.

people's acquirement of cultural capital has gradually increased their strength and staggered the balance of power. Thus, when the young laypeople demand for bureaucratising the religious institutions, these are about to assume the structure of ordinary associations with executive committees, presidents, vice-presidents, treasurers, and secretaries, similar to the structure of modern secular interest groups. But at the same time they also create this project: A recognised moral reputation unites the individual both to Islam and to modernity. The mastering of the moral discourse makes it possible for young Muslims to free themselves from ethnic, political, social and economic obligations, if they wish to do so. It legitimates their wishes to acquire jobs not formerly accepted, and it makes it possible for them to change affiliation from one Islamic fraction to another or to fully give up any sectarian relationship. Especially young women's mastering of the moral discourse makes it acceptable for them to engage in broader educational offers, secular as well as religious, and also a reputation of moral capacity opens up for capturing important positions in Islamic and secular institutions.

I will conclude that the young Muslims' speech acts on morals instigate a liberation process on more levels: on the individual level it challenges the internalised notions of the individual of what is religious knowledge and hereby it contributes to the change of the young peoples perception of themselves as subordinate and powerless. Also a process of emancipation in relation to personal skills is set in motion, which gives the young Muslims possibilities to take new, modern roads and use the democratic structures, which Ghana is busy implementing, without making it compulsory for them to break with the past. The increasing weight put on moral discourse has meant that the ability to perform moral statements is decisive for who is to be included in these new moral communities.

It is therefore of interest to know to what extend the young people feel a dilemma between, what they know they should do, according to the Islamic morals, which they themselves praise, and

what they personally long to do. Especially in the group of young Ahlu Sunna Muslims I encountered young people, who succeeded in using religious moral statements to legitimise personal goals and at the same time acquire personal recognition as good Muslims, but also I met with a category of young people, who aimed at solely acquiring expertise in the traditional Islamic sciences, Arabic, fiqh, etc.), which they later on found difficult to exchange to other forms of capital. Thus, they found themselves painted up into a corner of the Islamic field, in positions which did not enable them to take part in the modernisation project, because they could not use the sort of Islamic knowledge, they had acquired, to pursue the goals, which could meet the wishes for individual independence, but only their wants for social recognition.