ISLAMIC AFFILIATIONS AND URBAN ADAPTATION: THE SISALA MIGRANT IN ACCRA, GHANA

BRUCE T. GRINDAL

THIS study sets out to explain the relatively high incidence of Islamic affiliation among traditionally non-Islamic Sisala migrants living in the migrant community of Mamobi in Accra, Ghana. In the course of the presentation, I intend to demonstrate that the migrants’ relationship to Islam and the urban Islamic community is directly related to insecurities resulting from leaving one’s native area and confronting an alien and often dangerous, urban environment, and that Islam provides the migrant with the instrumental means by which to facilitate his adjustment to urban life.

BACKGROUND: THE SISALA AND THE TOWN OF MAMOBI

The Sisala people are situated primarily in north-western Ghana, but include a small population in Upper Volta. Their language, Isalang, belongs to the Voltaic language family, and in 1960 59,000 speakers resided in Ghana (Ghana Census Office, 1964).

As Voltaic speakers, they share linguistic and cultural affinities with most of the other tribes of northern Ghana, including the Dagomba, Mamprusi, Kusasi, Tallensi, Wala, and Dagarti. The area in which these groups live north of the Black Volta River is Guinea savannah woodland, a low rainfall zone consisting of wide stretches of grassland interspersed with trees and scrub bush.

Subsistence among the Sisala is based upon the hoe cultivation of cereal crops; cattle, sheep, and goats are also kept but are of subsidiary dietary importance. Land is held by the localized patrilineal kin group or clan and is worked collectively by the component patrilocal extended families. The extended family is the basic economically corporate unit controlling the use and distribution of large livestock and the food produced from the family farm. Partly as a result of a history of warfare and slave-raiding from the militarily more powerful Mossi and Zabirama peoples, the Sisala live in compact villages numbering 200 to 3,000 persons. While village composition varies considerably, the average village usually consists of lineage segments of more than one clan, varying in size from a single extended family to a maximal lineage segment with a depth of several generations.

Traditionally, political authority did not extend beyond the village, but resided among the heads of the component extended families and in the office of the ‘village owner’ (jangtina). The authority of the jangtina was, and still is, essentially ritual in nature; as custodian of the village shrine (vene), he is responsible for the performance of village calendrical rites and the adjudication of intra-village disputes through ritual means. While the British policy of indirect rule over the past half century has

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1 Research among the Sisala was undertaken over a nineteen-month period from September 1966 to March 1968 on a grant from the Foreign Area Fellowship Program. The greater part of this time was spent among the Sisala of the Tumu District in northern Ghana; however, from March to June 1967 I returned to Accra where I conducted a study of Sisala migrants living in Mamobi.
modified the political structure of Sisala society through the introduction of the institution of chieftaincy, the basic ritual functions of the jangtina still remain.

The religious system of the Sisala is essentially based upon veneration shrines relating to the land, the ancestors, personal spirits, medicines, and a variety of nature spirits. These shrines exist in relation to those segments of the human community which are under their jurisdiction; thus the structure of the supernatural closely parallels that of Sisala social organization and authority. The village shrine which is under the custodianship of the jangtina serves the ritual needs of the entire village and has jurisdiction over that segment of land owned by the village. In addition, each clan section, assuming there are more than one, has its own shrine. The worship of ancestors exists within the structure of either extended family or minor lineage while the ritual practices involving personal spirits and medicines are the affair of the individual and his immediate family. The spiritual shrines serve as guardians of the collective survival of the community of the living. Infractions of the norms of ritual and moral behaviour will cause the withdrawal of their protection, thus placing the community in a state of ritual danger, while the maintenance of proper behaviour brings the blessings of internal harmony, wealth, and human fertility.

In 1906 the Sisala people came under British colonial rule with the establishment of the Tumu administrative district. Unlike their more progressive colonial policy among the southern tribes, the British regarded the Sisala, as well as other northern peoples, as in a cultural backwater, and little attempt was made to develop the commercial potential of the area; indeed until the Second World War the major aim of colonial policy in the North was the simple maintenance of law and order. Among the Sisala, this isolation was particularly acute since from the years 1920 to 1946 no government station existed in the Tumu District. Also the geographical inaccessibility of the Sisala, with the lack of roads and transport facilities, served to widen the gap between them and the rapidly modernizing South.

Following the Second World War, however, reforms in British colonial policy led to an expanding of the Sisalas' awareness of developments elsewhere in the Gold Coast and, with the construction of roads and provision of transport facilities, there occurred a substantial increase in out-migration. According to the 1960 census (Ghana Census Office 1964: C-8) there were 59,210 Sisala and of these, 9,270 lived outside the 'native area' (i.e. Tumu, Wa, and Lawra Districts of the Upper Region). Of the latter group, about one-third had been born outside the native area, while about two-thirds had migrated from the North. In the twelve years which have passed since the census this number has undoubtedly increased.

The major thrust of Sisala migration has been towards the larger urban centres of the South such as Kumasi and Accra. Here the migrant usually settles among other northern tribesmen in migrant or 'zongo' communities. Because of lack of education and technical training, the migrant usually engages in unskilled labour. About one-half live in urban areas of over 5,000 people (Ghana Census Office 1964: 78) and the urban sex ratio is about three males for every two females (1964: 82), reflecting the transitory nature of urban migration. In recent years there has been an increased movement toward the rural areas. In contrast to the urban dweller, the rural migrant tends to be more sedentary, establishing a household with his wife and children and engaging in cash-crop farming or the commercial production of charcoal.
One aspect of migratory behaviour, which is of particular significance in this study, is the relatively high incidence of Islamic affiliation among Sisala urban dwellers. Traditionally the Sisala have been resistant to Islam; while they share certain traits such as dress with the more Islamized tribes of the Sudan, Islam as a religion has made virtually no inroads into the traditional religious system. In urban areas over 5,000 there is a significant increase. According to the 1960 census, 15.0 per cent of all Sisala are Moslems; but only 8.4 per cent of rural Sisala are Moslems while this percentage increases to 49.4 per cent in urban areas (Ghana Census Office 1964: 128, lxxxiv). In addition, it must be noted that 'urban' population aggregations are non-existent in the Sisala tribal area; thus, all Sisala urban dwellers are migrants or of migrant parentage. The percentage given for rural Sisala Moslems also includes rural migrants among whom a high Islamic percentage may be suspected. Thus from a brief survey of census data we may tentatively conclude that Sisala Islamization is directly related to migration and urbanization.

The town of Mamobi is located on the northern outskirts of Accra, covering an area of approximately one square mile. Residence is highly nucleated in about one-fourth of the area, the remainder consisting of sparsely populated vacant lots extending outwards from the centre. Settlements are arranged haphazardly: rectangular compounds, varying in size from four to twenty-five rooms, are located in close proximity to one another, usually separated by winding pathways and sewerage gullies. Along the larger pathways are kiosks, small shops, beer bars, and eating places or 'chop bars'.

The population of Mamobi is 5,790; of this, approximately 90 per cent is ethnically non-indigenous, consisting of northern tribesmen and a significantly large proportion of non-Ghanaians from northern Togo and Upper Volta. Demographically, Mamobi exhibits the characteristics of a rapidly growing and transient population with a low percentage of native-born residents, a high ratio of males to females, and a proportionately large adult population. By way of comparison the following table gives some of the critical demographic features for Ghana, Accra, and Mamobi (Ghana Census Office, 1962: 196–7, 208–9) (Ghana Census Office, 1964: 23, 62).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ghana</th>
<th>Accra</th>
<th>Mamobi</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Total population</td>
<td>6,726,820</td>
<td>588,396</td>
<td>5,790</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Percentage of native-born residents (i.e. living in same region as born)</td>
<td>79.3%</td>
<td>51.2%</td>
<td>24.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Ratio of males to females</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>1.48</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Ratio of males to females in the 25- to 44-year-old age group</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>1.52</td>
<td>2.34</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Percentage of total population 15 years old and over</td>
<td>55.5%</td>
<td>61.1%</td>
<td>66.5%</td>
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While Northerners make up most of the population, the land and the majority of the dwellings built upon it are owned by the indigenous Ga tribesmen. The Northerner then occupies a 'non-owner' or 'stranger' position, renting from a landlord and working for an employer. Disputes involving members of different tribes are generally brought before the Ga chief. Assuming that these disputes are not serious or of criminal character the functions of the Ga chief comprise the resolution of conflict and the maintenance of order among those living on his land.

Within the 'stranger' community, any tribe with sufficient representation has a
zongo chief'. While the methods of selection vary from tribe to tribe, the zongo chief is usually an elderly man who is a more or less permanent resident of Mamobi and who through his wisdom and deeds has earned the respect of his fellow tribesmen. This element of respect is very important since the chief has neither the legal nor the ritual means to support his authority; thus his authority is limited to providing assistance and resolving minor disputes among his tribesmen. In addition many tribes, including the Sisala, have mutual-aid societies in which the membership banks a percentage of its earnings which serve as a savings and loan fund.

Overlying the particularistic and informally structured tribal institutions are those of the Islamic community. Mamobi has an imam or ‘prayer leader’ who is responsible for public worship, the performance of calendrical and transitional rites, and the conduct of the Koranic school. In addition there are several individuals who assume the title of malam or ‘lettered man’ and who, like the imam, have had extensive Koranic education and profess a knowledge of Arabic and Islamic law. These lettered men aid the imam in the performance of his ritual duties; also many with knowledge of ‘medicines’ establish themselves as independent practitioners or consultants. For the most part these clerics come from the traditionally Islamic tribes of northern Togo and Upper Volta; thus like the rest of the community, they also occupy the position of ‘strangers’.

Approximately 200 to 250 Sisala live in Mamobi and, like other tribal groups, may be divided into short-term and long-term residents.

The short-term residents are invariably young men between the ages of twenty and twenty-five years who have migrated from the North within the last five years. Most of these individuals regard migration and their stay in Accra as temporary, expressing the eventual desire to return home. Because of lack of education (90 per cent illiteracy), these migrants engage in low-paying occupations. The average wage is twenty New Cedis (about twenty-five dollars) a month; the more common occupations include steward boy, gardener, watchman, and road-work labourer. The rate of unemployment is twenty-five per cent. These young men are usually unmarried or, if married, are not living with their wives who remain at home in the North. In Mamobi, the newly arrived migrant usually seeks out a kinsman or age-mate with whom he establishes residence. From two to five people may occupy a single room within a large compound; because of the rapid turnover of population such rooms become chain migrant households which serve to accommodate the constant flow of young men into Mamobi.

Among the older and more permanent residents, there exist the same low standards of education, income, and occupation; however, the rate of unemployment is lower, and most see their occupations as permanent. In contrast to the young migrant the older resident is usually married, often to a non-Sisala woman. These individuals live in nuclear family households; they occupy one or two rooms in one of the compounds or, if fortunate, may own their own small dwellings.

**Islam and the Problems of the Migrant**

In addition to the above-mentioned characteristics, there is another significant aspect of differentiation between these two groups: the percentage of Islamic affiliation. Among the younger migrants, only 40 per cent claim Islamic affiliation; among the older residents about 80 per cent are Moslems.
To explain the nature and causes of Islamic affiliation involves an understanding of the problems and anxieties involved in the migratory experience. In fact when Sisala individuals were asked why they chose to become Moslems, they invariably prefaced their answers with a discussion of the problems and dangers of urban life. Not only did they mention the obvious dangers such as bodily injury and accidents but also the economic and psychological insecurities involved in urban adjustment. For these reasons the Sisala say that a man needs protection, a protection which is afforded by Islam in its various manifestations. Thus, before proceeding with a discussion of Islamic affiliation, I shall first examine the motivations underlying migration and some of the problems involved in adjusting to urban life.

Most Sisala maintain that their decision to travel was based upon stories they had heard from former migrants who had returned to the tribal area. In these stories the South is described as a land of great wealth where the buildings are many storeys high, where the people ride either in cars or on bicycles, where the ‘social life’ abounds, and where one can earn the money necessary to buy such things as bicycles, clothing, and other articles of finery. Such descriptions, however, are in large part myths which are perpetuated by the returned migrant who wishes to convey to others a positive image of himself and his experiences. Thus he does not talk about—or at least dwell upon—the problems he encountered or the disgrace and humiliation he might have suffered as a result of his poverty. In essence what is communicated is a positive image of the South, and to the young neophyte this myth becomes his expectation.

Beneath these surface expectations, however, lies a deeper motivation involving the desire for ownership and economic independence. One young migrant living in Accra explained his feelings as follows:

When I was living in my father’s house, there was nothing to do but help my father on the farm. If I worked my own farm and sold what I had grown in the market, I had to show respect to my father and give him the money I earned. And if I wanted to buy some clothing or beer for my friends on market day, I would have to beg my father for money. I may be poor now, but at least I own my own clothes. And if I want to buy beer for my friends, I don’t have to ask my father.

In the traditional society ownership and economic independence are largely a function of age, since it is only by growing older that one comes to inherit the positions of wealth and authority with respect to one’s extended family and its property. Migration to the South thus provides a means of bypassing the traditional age-status system by allowing the young man sufficient economic autonomy to acquire the material symbols of wealth and prestige. To this may be added the young man’s perception of the returning migrant as against his perception of himself as a poor farmer. Each reinforces the other; one provides the underlying motivation and the other a direction for the expression of this motivation.

In contrast to his expectations, the migrant’s first contact with Southern urban life is an unexpected and often shattering experience. Unless he is fortunate and able to secure immediate employment, he spends the period of his initial adjustment in abject dependency upon kinsmen or friends who like himself are usually living near subsistence level. In order to gain employment the migrant must often resort to women’s work such as carrying water and firewood or pounding yams. Hopes of
buying nice clothing and gifts must often be abandoned, and the need for money frequently leads to a cycle of perpetual debt.

Notwithstanding the aid given by fellow tribesmen, great demands are placed upon the migrant’s initiative in contracting relationships and securing a livelihood. In a very real sense these pressures for independence and autonomy are the root causes of much anxiety. In traditional Sisala society little emphasis is placed upon the independence training of children. Instead both child and adult are expected to learn the values of co-operation and mutual respect, and a person who shows a desire to be independent of others is regarded as selfish if not evil. The migrant's encounter with the city then is frequently traumatic, resulting in loneliness and a deep sense of personal helplessness.

These feelings of inadequacy are often compounded by feelings of guilt resulting from the migrant’s inability to maintain proper ties with his kin in the native area. Ideally migration is supposed to be a temporary experience, and great importance is attached to maintaining kin ties even when the migrant is living in the South. The attractions of urban life, however, often cause the migrant to remain in the city longer than he intended. Further, the problems of poverty and spatial distance often prevent him from fulfilling traditional economic, ritual, and sometimes marital obligations; as a result many migrants are forced by pride to remain in the South to spare themselves the humiliation of returning home in poverty. Thus, over time kin ties become weaker and the possibility of returning home becomes increasingly remote.

The following statement by a Sisala migrant clearly demonstrates the despair which results from these feelings of guilt and inadequacy.

When I was living with my father, my food was free, my room was free. At home, I worked hard on the farm, but I never had to worry. Here in Mamobi everything costs money. If you can’t find work, you will starve and nobody cares. . . . What makes me sad is that I am ashamed. I want to go home, but I don’t have money for the lorry fare. If I did, I am still too poor to go home. Also I am sad because I have been away so long and my father hasn’t heard from me. I fear sometimes that I may never go home and this is the saddest thing.

To these problems may also be added a sense of religious insecurity. The Sisala frequently say that in the South they are strangers on another’s land and that they must abide by his rules. Being a stranger, however, has deeper implications. In the North the Sisala man is an ‘owner’ of not only his land and his house but also his shrines and gods. When he migrates, the entire complex of customs and institutions revolving around the concept of ownership becomes incompatible with his new role. These would include the system of land tenure based upon economically corporate compounds, the whole system of political authority—both secular and ritual—which is based upon the ownership and control of land, and the complex of religious beliefs connected with the land or to specific locations and natural phenomena. To be a stranger means to be not only disenfranchised but also placed in a state of imminent danger without the protection of one’s ancestors and protective medicines.

Thus migration creates a psycho-social and psycho-cultural hiatus wherein the migrant perceives himself as alone and unprotected, lacking the means by which to resolve his problems and anxieties. Islam, as I shall demonstrate, serves to fill this
socio-cultural vacuum by providing ritual protection and an element of security. However, even though basic similarities exist, the migrant's affiliation to Islam is variable and this variation tends to be patterned in terms of his permanence as an urban dweller.

Among short-term migrants—or especially among those short-term migrants who intend to return home—Islamic affiliation consists almost solely of consulting Moslem medicine practitioners in times of personal crisis. These crises are for the most part directly related to the contingencies of urban life. Problems such as theft, passenger lorry accidents, and unemployment which are foreign to traditional village life suddenly become the cause of great anxiety. In addition the strangeness of the city increases suspicions of witchcraft and evil magic. Due in part to the absence of other forms of ritual protection, the malam practitioner is seen as being in possession of great powers. Thus in times of crisis the migrant frequently consults a malam, and in return for the payment of a fee, receives either a cure or some kind of protective amulet.

These cures or remedies exhibit considerable variation. In many cases the malam may merely give counsel or advice by citing relevant passages from the Koran. In others the cures are definitely magical and most frequently consist of horoscope readings, dream analyses, recitation of prayers, and the prescription of protective amulets. One of the more common cures consists of the malam writing an appropriate passage from the Koran on a slate with a piece of chalk; whereupon he carefully washes the slate with a cup of water and instructs the patient to drink the chalky water.

While a detailed examination of Islamic medicine is beyond the scope of this paper, the kind of problems which the malam treats is definitely relevant to the uncertainties and anxieties of urban life. The following is a list of some of the more common problems based upon interviews with three Moslem practitioners in Mamobi. It should be noted that these problems are representative of northern tribesmen in general; however, the author has no reason to believe that they differ significantly from those faced by the Sisala in particular.

1. Unemployment or fear of losing one's job. (In these cases the malam may either give advice or else prescribe a herbal remedy to increase the patient's power or 'personal force'. Occasionally cures consist of using black magic against a senior worker or supervisor though none of the malams interviewed personally admitted to doing this.)

2. Fear of failing a civil service or school examination. (Similar to above.)

3. Fear of personal harm resulting from theft, weapons, and motor vehicle accidents. (The remedies in these cases usually consist of protective amulets and herbal prescriptions.)

4. Fear of bad dreams. (Bad dreams are interpreted by the malam as possession by evil spirits, jinn. Divination is used in diagnosis and incense is often prescribed to remedy the symptoms.)

5. Uncertainty or failure in affairs of the heart. (The malam usually prescribes a form of love magic consisting of a sweet smelling incense mixed with a body lotion or pomade.)

6. Inability to bear children and desire for abortion. (In the former, prayers and herbal remedies are used; in the latter, the malams claim that even though they are capable of performing abortions they do not do it since it is immoral.)

Even though respect is given to the powers of the malam, he is often regarded
with an attitude of distrust or ambivalence. Before migrating South, the only knowledge which most Sisala had concerning Islam was by their associations with individuals from such tribes as the Hausa, Yoruba, and Mossi who live in the tribal area as artisans, traders, and petty entrepreneurs. Intrusive and marginal to the dominant society, they are seen as selfish, clannish, and clandestine in their behaviour. Consequently, the Sisala are often wary of what they call Moslem magic or ‘juju’, and in order to protect themselves against this ‘juju’, many eat the meat of dogs and pigs precisely because Moslems taboo these animals. Once in the South, these suspicions are partially belied by the fact that many of one’s fellow tribesmen are Moslems; none the less, they often remain and it is not uncommon for a Sisala man to consult one *malam* in order to secure protection against the ‘juju’ of another *malam*.

Among short-term migrants, then, Islamic affiliation like migration is seen as a temporary episode. When a man goes South his main aims consist of seeking adventure, gaining knowledge of different peoples and languages, acquiring a small amount of personal wealth, and finally returning home with an aura of prestige. The idea of remaining in the South permanently is viewed as undesirable; for the Sisala say that a man who does not wish to return home usually comes from a poor family and thus has nothing to return to. Islam then is a form of temporary ritual protection, and even those who do not regard themselves as Moslems often take advantage of the protective qualities afforded by Islamic herbal remedies and amulets. Upon returning to the tribal area, this affiliation is usually disregarded in the light of the renewed protection of one’s ancestral and spiritual shrines.

In contrast to the short-term migrant’s eclectic embrace of Islam, one finds a more devout orientation among the permanent residents of Mamobi. The permanent or long-time resident regards himself as a ‘believer’ in the Moslem way, and he frequently derides those of his fellow tribesmen who embrace only the magical aspects of Islamic medicine. Included in the observance of the Moslem way are ritual prayer, observance of taboos, participation in the transitional rites of naming, marriage, and death, involvement in the calendrical rites of the Islamic community, and the pilgrimage to Mecca as an ideal goal.

This stronger identification with Islam and the Moslem community must first be understood in terms of the relationship of the long-term migrant to his kin in the native area. As mentioned previously, migration is supposed to be a temporary experience. In the case of the long-term resident, however, this ideal has not been met, and the longer he remains in the city, the more difficult it becomes for him to return home. Aside from the loneliness and guilt frequently precipitated by such prolonged absences, the migrant is also confronted with the problem of morally justifying his more or less permanent status as an urban dweller. In this connection the migrant’s devout orientation towards Islam and the Moslem community serves to rationalize his independence from his traditional kin, thus alleviating anxieties caused by the strain in this relationship.

These rationalizations exhibit a high degree of variation depending, among other things, upon the personality of the migrant and his particular home situation. However, most migrants explain that their decision to remain in the South was dictated by the will of God (*Allah*) and that as Moslems the urban environment is most suitable for the practice of their beliefs. To return home is seen by some as tantamount
to forsaking their beliefs since many believe that they could not follow the Islamic way in a pagan traditional setting.

To break with one's 'pagan' roots, however, is not without consequences. Among the Sisala the traditional religion, and particularly ancestor worship and associated mortuary customs, is vital not only to the continuity of the traditional society but also to the very definition of one's humanity and social identity. In traditional times, the very idea of breaking with one's religion would be unheard of, if not totally irrational. The fact that the migrant is often unable to fulfil his obligations or participate in these vital activities frequently precipitates a severe personal crisis characterized by an ever-widening sense of alienation and loss of self-definition. Periodic failures to fulfil his ritual obligations may even lead to an irreparable break in the migrant's relationship to his kin.

Admittedly, this is a very sensitive topic and many migrants were unwilling to speak about it. The following excerpt from my field notes, however, represents one man's attempt to justify his non-participation in his traditional religion. The individual is a devout Moslem who has lived in Mamobi for twenty years.

Q. Do you believe in the ancestors (lélé)?
A. It is true that we believe in our ancestors. But in our Sisala way, we call our ancestors our gods, the same as Allah. You know, all animals have legs and humans have two legs; both legs must follow the same path, they cannot take different paths. And so it is with the Moslem way; you cannot have your prayers and still sacrifice to the ancestors. And so when you become a Moslem, you forget the ancestors—though we believe in them—because you cannot have two.

Q. But won't the ancestors be offended if you do not sacrifice to them?
A. The ancestors cannot be angry if they see that you are a Moslem. When you are a Moslem you do not sit down with the fetish and pour water and slaughter fowls—you just don't do it. But you can go out and buy a fowl and slaughter it in the Moslem way. Then you cook some food and you call all your children to come and eat. You then pray to your ancestors. You pray in the Moslem way.

Q. But what if your ancestors weren't Moslems?
A. If you are a Moslem but your father wasn't, you cannot pray to him for it would only be a joke. But if your father was a Moslem, then you pray to your mother and father to rest in peace. We believe in Heaven and Hell. In Hell there are seven rooms and in Heaven there are seven rooms again. But at one time there was a king called Faroona who built a very fine house in heaven. This eighth house is for people who were good on earth but who were not Moslems. So if your father was not a Moslem, you can still pray to him in the Moslem way for he will be in one of the houses of heaven.

Islam: Social Identity and Community

So far we have examined the migrant's affiliation to Islam as largely a response to anxieties involved in adjusting to urban life. For the short-term migrant, Islam in the form of amulets and medicines provides the means for ritually managing the migrant's relationship to the unpredictable and dangerous urban environment. In these cases many who avail themselves of Islamic medicines do not necessarily claim Islamic affiliation. However, as the migrant remains away from home for successively longer periods of time, these external problems are compounded by a sense of guilt resulting
from the migrant’s inability successfully to maintain the proper relationship with his kin in the native area. Here Islam further functions to provide the migrant with a rationale for his independence, and Islamic affiliation is both more frequent and more devout.

However, Islamic affiliation is more than merely a rationalization or form of temporary protection. It also confers upon the migrant a new sense of identity as an urban dweller, an identity which is reinforced within an ongoing and viable Moslem community.

One of the more significant effects of southward migration is to create within the migrant an awareness of his position in the larger society. While living in the South, the Sisala migrant becomes increasingly aware of the differences in wealth between the rich and poor. The image of the ‘big man’, living in a two-storey house and driving a black Mercedes-Benz, is beyond the expectations of the migrant. The life of the ‘big man’, like that of the white man, is viewed as one of leisure and except for its outer manifestations, is incomprehensible to the average Sisala. Thus while the migrant may perceive himself as more experienced and worldly than his unacculturated tribesmen, he none the less sees himself as a poor man whether he be a farmer in the North or a zongo dweller in the South.

This division between rich and poor is also perceived as falling along ethnic lines. As mentioned previously, British colonial policy towards the Sisala and other northern tribes made little attempt to develop the educational and commercial potential of the area; as a consequence the developmental history of Ghana has been one of a growing division between the North and the wealthier and more acculturated South. The Sisala migrant thus comes to perceive himself not merely as a Sisala tribesman but as a Northerner—or more precisely as a poor, illiterate, and uprooted Northerner. This negative self image is further reinforced by the ethnic prejudice of the Southerner who views the migrant as dirty, primitive, and lacking a genuine culture.

In large part, the Sisala migrant’s affiliation with Islam represents a desire to escape an undesirable ethnic self image. His traditional religion with its ‘fetishes’ and animal sacrifice is perceived at best as anachronistic while Islam occupies a superior status as a universal religion. More importantly, Islam provides an identity nexus for the Sisala and other northern tribal migrants living in Mamobi which serves to differentiate the migrant from both the predominantly Christian southern population and his unacculturated and pagan tribesman living in the North. The migrant’s perception of himself as a Moslem is thus bound to his larger ethnic identity as a Northerner and his circumstances as an urban dweller.

This affiliation with Islam coupled with the experience of southward migration and the migrant’s identification with the community of northern tribes create the basis of a cosmopolitan-like identity. In contrast to his unacculturated tribesmen, the migrant sees himself as a man who has travelled, who has gained first-hand experience of the hardships of life, and who has acquired the knowledge and common sense necessary to cope with today’s problems and today’s people. The man who does not travel, on the other hand, does not acquire real knowledge since he has never had to face the world unaided by his kinsmen. Life in the South is seen as building character, a character born of suffering and of an awareness of how things are, an awareness of reality.
The migrant also sees himself as more ‘civilized’. Habits of personal cleanliness, the use of eating utensils, and the desire for nice clothing all represent changes in his life style which set him apart from his unaculturated tribesmen. Beyond this, however, being ‘civilized’ refers to a significant concept concerning the acquisition of knowledge and the contracting of social relationships. The Sisala believe that a man must travel in order to acquire ‘wisdom’ (wijima) for it is only by travelling that a person can form new relationships and learn about the world around him. In the context of traditional Sisala society, the value placed upon ‘wisdom’ or ‘civilized’ behaviour is reflected in the desirability of contracting a wide range of political alliances and affinal relationships creating a complex network of rights and obligations. In the urban setting this value is elevated to a pan-tribal level. Relationships with members of other tribes afford the migrant an opportunity to learn new languages, acquire useful skills, and generally broaden his knowledge and awareness of the world.

The following statement by a returned migrant is a typical Sisala evaluation of experiences in the South.

In Tumu [the major town in the tribal area], there are people who have never been anywhere. They don’t know anything. They haven’t seen anything. They just listen to what people say. They are blind. This place is not like the South. Because when we go down South, you see a lot of forest, traffic is very much, you see a lot of [multi]-storey buildings. There you can learn something like a trade. Here you can’t learn anything. In that place you mix with different people; and if you are good, you can learn different languages. When you are down South, you can eat, sleep, and bathe whenever you want and nobody cares. But when you stay near your parents, you won’t learn anything. Here you just ask your mother or your brother’s wives for food, and they give it to you. Down South you have to work for these things. And so it is good for one to go out to different towns. When I was young and had not been to the South, I didn’t really know anything at all. But when I went and saw so many things—if I had not been there, I would never have learned a trade. In the South I took a bath twice a day and used to get dressed up. In the evening I would go and watch games, football and horse races. I used to go to the cinema to see different kinds of activities. On my return to Tumu, I was able to get a sewing machine. I also got some clothes and some furniture. You could never get things like this through farming. There are many men like me down South because of such things. When one stays here, you can’t have anything, know anything, or get a good job. That is what makes our people travel to other places.

Islam, as a traditionally urban religion functions to maintain and reinforce this self image. The basic equation of civilized with urbane behaviour, found elsewhere in the Moslem world, is also accentuated within the Islamic community of Mamobi. Most Sisala Moslems emphasize the necessity of living in a city, stating that the traditional rural society with its stress upon kin ties and obligations is not conducive to practising the basic tenets of the Moslem way. Furthermore, in contrast to the migrant’s traditional religion these basic tenets—daily prayer, giving alms, and observing Ramadan—may be practised anywhere where a Moslem community exists, thus affording the migrant a wider range of identification with other northern tribal zongo communities and a greater potential for geographic mobility.

Beyond providing an identity nexus, Islam also provides the people of Mamobi with a sense of community, rendering a degree of permanence and order to the constantly fluctuating, pan-tribal realities of zongo life. Within the highly transient
community of Mamobi, the presence of chain migrant households and the large turnover of population militate against the formation of stable and enduring interpersonal relationships. While the zongo chiefs of the various tribes do make efforts to resolve conflicts and affect unity, they are not legally empowered to enforce their directives and their sphere of influence does not extend to intertribal affairs. This influence is also weakened by the fact that many migrants attach little importance to their tribal identity and thus refuse to co-operate with their zongo chiefs in intratribal affairs. The only legally empowered agents of social control are the police, court officials, and petty bureaucrats of the city and national governments. These individuals, however, are perceived by the zongo dwellers as distant, corruptible, and insensitive to the people’s needs and suffering. In large part then the Moslem community with its educational and ritual institutions exists in the absence of any alternative sense of community and social order.

In perhaps no area of the migrant’s life does the need for order appear as significantly as in the area of child training and education. Migrant parents are generally apprehensive with respect to raising children in a zongo community stating that the city is a dangerous place and that the parent must be extremely observant lest his child fall into bad company. This is especially true for girls whom the parents fear might become pregnant. The fact that unrelated families usually share the same compound also creates problems with regard to parental discipline. In this setting the father is empowered to discipline only his own children, and thus, if his child gets into a fight with a stranger’s child or if the stranger’s child acts disrespectfully toward him, he is powerless to mete out punishment. If he did, he might well become involved in a quarrel with the child’s father.

The migrant parent is thus very concerned that his child grow up to be an industrious and respectful adult. At the same time he realizes that traditional educational standards and expectations must be modified and that he must prepare his children for a world different from his own early experience. While the parent may retain some identification with his kin back home, the child born in the zongo does not; his is an urban world where tribal roots are relatively unimportant. Finally, the parent realizes that what he must teach his child is not necessarily inherent in his daily routine. If the parent is a wage worker, the child does not accompany his father as a child in the village would follow his father to the farm. As a result, parents realize that the upbringing of their children must take on a greater element of conscious direction.

For these reasons, most migrant parents send their male and occasionally female children to the Koranic school in Mamobi. Basic Koranic education begins at about the age of six and lasts from four to six years. Here the child learns to master the Arabic alphabet, perform basic prayers, and memorize important passages from the Koran. In addition children are instructed in the rudiments of moral conduct becoming to a good Moslem: the belief in one God, the giving of alms to the poor, the performance of daily prayers, the value of fasting, and the virtue of the pilgrimage to Mecca.

While Koranic education does not provide the child with useful occupational skills, it does serve to inculcate the basic moral values of Islam and the Moslem community. The following statement by the imam of Mamobi (and also head of the Koranic school) clearly points up this important function.
When the children go to school, they learn lessons from the Koran. However, between lessons we teach them many important things like respecting their elderly people. And again we teach the children that when they leave school and go home, they should try to help their parents. At home they should politely greet everyone in the house. And if the father and mother are doing something which the child knows how to do, he should not sit down but should give a helping hand. When elderly people are talking, the children shouldn’t sit by and make noise, but should sit and listen closely to what is going on. We also teach them cleanliness. On Saturdays and Sundays they should try to wash their clothes and iron them. Also they should keep their father’s house tidy. They must respect elderly people outside the house and not go about abusing strangers. We teach the children these things so they will become good Moslems. You know the city is a dangerous place. There are many people here who waste their lives; they drink and become careless. But a good Moslem is somebody who behaves gently. He doesn’t talk by heart [i.e., without constraint] to make his friends angry. He is not one who drinks or misbehaves. If you tell him nonsense, he won’t mind you and will just walk away. He will help other people who are in need. He will know when his friend has troubles, and he will sit with him and give him good advice to cool down his heart or just make him happy.

The values of respect and amity in human relationships which are basic to Koranic education are also essential to the effective functioning of a community. In Mamobi whatever sense of community exists is constantly under stress from unemployment, poverty, high geographical mobility, and the general anomic character of urban life. Koranic education, by giving universal religious value to the essential moral axioms of human relationships, transcends the weakly sanctioned moralities of the individual tribes and creates a basis for interaction in a pan-tribal setting.

Beyond the Koranic school, these values are maintained through the various Moslem ritual institutions, especially those involved in the transitional rites of naming, graduation from Koranic school, marriage, and the funeral. Since these rites are of a public nature, they function at one level as expressions of the collective solidarity of the Moslem community. Beyond this, however, they also function to reinforce this solidarity by involving each individual in a complex network of rights and obligations with his fellow Moslems. Thus when a young adolescent graduates from Koranic school, a ceremony is performed honouring his graduation at which time friends of the boy’s family present him with gifts and money. Upon the receipt of these gifts the young man and his family become indebted to others in the Moslem community and are expected to reciprocate on similar occasions. Marriage further involves transactions between the family of the bride and that of the groom. These transactions are particularly significant for the cohesion of the community since the majority of Islamic marriages occur between members of different tribes. Finally the funeral, in addition to affirming an ultimate relationship to the Islamic faith, also affords a mystical connection with traditional religion and society. Thus when an Islamic funeral is performed in Mamobi, the fellow tribesmen of the deceased frequently include elements of traditional mortuary ritual.

Any further description and analysis of the social structure of Mamobi is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say, however, that the viability of the Moslem community stems from a desire and commitment on the part of the Sisala and other northern migrants to achieve a common identity. The maintenance of the community’s norms is not sanctioned by political and legal institutions possessing the
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legitimate use of public force, but by a basic respect for Islamic teaching and by the individual's embeddedness in the socio-economic rights and obligations resulting from his involvement in Islamic ritual institutions.

REFERENCES


Résumé

CONVERSION À L’ISLAMISME ET ADAPTATION URBaine:
LES MIGRANTS SISALA À ACCRA, GHANA

Cette étude met en lumière l’interaction certaine de la conversion à l’Islamisme et de l’adaptation à la vie urbaine chez les migrants Sisala — traditionnellement non musulmans — vivant dans la communauté des migrants de Mamobi, à Accra, au Ghana.

Les Sisala sont une population patrilinéaire acéphale vivant au nord-ouest du Ghana. Historiquement les Sisala (aussi bien que les autres populations du Nord Ghana de langue voltaïque) n’ont pas été soumis à des influences modernes intensives; cependant, depuis la dernière guerre, il y a eu une augmentation significative des migrations externes vers le plus grand centre urbain du Ghana du Sud. Là les Sisala tendent à s’établir parmi les autres migrants de langue voltaïque dans des communautés de migrants ou zongo à l’intérieur de cités plus étendues.

La conversion du migrant Sisala à l’Islamisme est en relation directe avec l’insécurité provenant de son départ de sa zone d’origine et de sa confrontation avec un environnement étranger et le plus souvent alienant. À court terme, l’Islamisme fournit à ces migrants, sous la forme d’amulettes et de médecines, les moyens de maîtriser leurs anxiétés dues à leur installation urbaine. Pour ceux qui résident en ville depuis un certain temps, le rôle de l’Islamisme est plutôt d’apporter au migrant la preuve rationnelle de son incapacité à maintenir avec succès une relation suivie avec sa parenté restée dans la zone tribale; dans ces cas la conversion à l’Islamisme est à la fois plus fréquente et plus sincère.

Ces conversions à l’Islamisme sont associées à l’expérience de migration vers le sud et à l’identification des migrants avec une communauté plus vaste de tribus de langue voltaïque; elle permet une nouvelle définition du statut de citadin. Ce statut, en retour, est renforcé du fait que les migrants sont investis des droits et des obligations des membres d’une communauté musulmane viable et dynamique.