

Islamic Thought in Africa: The Collected Works of Afa Ajura (1910-2004) and the Impact of Ajuraism on Northern Ghana

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ZAKYI IBRAHIM (TRANS.)

Since the formal end of colonial occupation of African countries by imperial powers, the last few decades have witnessed ballooning interests in the study of Islam and Muslim societies in West Africa. This is partly complemented by the sudden religious transformations and radical shifts from syncretistic strands of Islam brought about by different Islamic reform projects. This factor has posed decisive survival threats to these syncretist groups as the edifices upon which they were initially constructed were subjected into perpetual checks and cross-examinations. Consequently, the reform projects elicited an internal reexamination within Islamic groups that were hitherto dominated by traditional practices and beliefs that seem to no longer appeal to rational investigation.

Zakyy Ibrahim introduces the reader to the state of Islamic thought in Africa with a focus on the works of Alhaji Yusuf Salihu Ajura (a.k.a. Afa Ajura), a Muslim reformer who cultivated his niche by contesting Sufi beliefs and rituals as well as traditional practices he deemed irreligious

among Dagomba people in Northern Ghana. The book is not structured in the conventional format of systematically broken-down chapters, but rather into thematic divisions. The whole book, covering the excellent work of the translator and Afa Ajura's projects, thus has four major segments: (i) the biographical profile of Afa Ajura, which also gives a glimpse into his lifeworld and the sociocultural and religious setting in which he operated; (ii) the main reform mission which Afa Ajura prosecuted, taking into account his process of teaching and transmission of knowledge, his preaching against irreligious, cultural practices and baseless innovations among Dagomba people and Tijjānīyah respectively, his encounters with resistant elements and forces whose activities his mission had challenged and how he at the end triumphed over all his traducers; (iii) analytical introduction of sixteen poems of Afa Ajura with reference to a few key verses; and (iv) the presentation of the translated poems.

In the introductory section, Ibrahim provides a brief biographical profile of Afa Ajura, including his birth and the debate on the year in which he was born. Ibrahim then proceeds to highlight Ajura's early life and knowledge acquisition, pointing out some of the places in and outside Tamale where Afa Ajura wandered to meet scholars and study various Islamic sciences. As the Tijjānīyah order was then the dominant strand of Islam in Northern Ghana, almost all of Afa Ajura's teachers had a leaning toward the Tijjānīyah fraternity. Some of the broadminded Tijjānī scholars under whom he studied would later renounce their affiliation to Tijjānīyah and send their sons to the Islamic University of Medina to become established scholars in their own right (6-7). This would likely be enumerated as part of the success of Afa Ajura's reform movement.

Ibrahim further highlights Afa Ajura's early clerical career which commenced with his active involvement in the activities scholars engaged both in the name of religious ritual such as the celebration of *mawlid* (anniversary of the birth of Prophet Muhammad) and preparation of potion, talisman and amulet, a sort of Islamic divination known as *ṭibb*, where scholars "manipulated the Qur'anic wisdom and verses ostensibly to solve people's impending or insurmountable problems" (8). Afa Ajura made a lot of money through the clients who patronized his services.

The act of providing solution to people's problem through *tibb*, which has become widespread in African societies, is still a lucrative business that is patronized by powerful and ambitious politicians. Women also are among the most zealous clients of *tibb* especially to control husbands or sabotage plans of their husbands to marry additional wives. As can be discerned from Ibrahim's narrative, Afa Ajura was not initially detached from the sociocultural practices and ethos of his immediate environment as evidenced, besides his venture into Islamic divination, by his participation during his youth as a drummer for the famous *Amajoro* dance (10).

Although Afa Ajura was still not outside the Sufi milieu, his reform opinions started unfolding in the early 1950s, which coincided with the construction of his mosque that would later come to serve as a strategic locus for his religious activities. In 1960, Afa Ajura honored an invitation of a *mawlid* in Accra, and when he was called upon to speak, he changed his topic from the impossibility of seeing God as organizers wanted him to do, to a topic of attacking Tijāni litanies (79). Ibrahim categorizes the whole clerical career of Afa Ajura into three broad divisions: "teaching and educating...; preaching and reforming; and composing poems" (11).

The teaching and educating, which were the promising precursor of Afa Ajura's reform movement, took roots in the 1940s with a group of few disciples that gathered and received lessons directly from Afa Ajura. This format reflects the prevalent traditional and informal system of transmission of Islamic knowledge using classical texts as the curriculum. This orthodox system, which still functions effectively, is widespread in West Africa, where it came from the Maghreb through Timbuktu. Many prominent scholars passed through this stage in their learning. Afa Ajura combined both the teaching of adults and the teaching of Qur'an to young pupils (most of whom were children he adopted from other families) typical of an elementary level (12). This latter partly resembles the *almajiri* system of education known mostly in northern Nigeria. The Qur'anic school would later grow, develop, and expand to a higher Islamic institution formally registered as Anbaryyya Islamic School.

Of all the three intellectual cycles around which Afa Ajura's clerical career revolved, the most polarizing and contentious is his preaching and

reform effort, which inevitably brought him into ideological conflict with the group of people he attacked. Apart from irreligious cultural practices during funeral and wedding ceremonies, visiting and belief in soothsayers, pursuing and patronizing divination, which some Dagomba clerics willfully endorsed and greedily performed, Afa Ajura also launched his polemics and criticism against Sufi beliefs and rituals, especially the Tijjāniyah group which was the most widespread order in Tamale city in northern Ghana. As the translator observes, Afa Ajura's reform of irreligious funeral services not only redeemed his followers from the extortionate nature of funeral ceremonies which used to favor Tijāni clerics as beneficiaries, but also provided effective and legally backed leeway for poor folks even outside Afa Ajura's camp to evade being subjected into unnecessary exploitation.

To demonstrate Afa Ajura's impact on eradicating irreligious cultural practices, Ibrahim intimates the reader of a virginity test which fell among the many well entrenched wedding practices that Afa Ajura fought against in the Dagomba Muslim society. This test was applied on a bride on the first day her marriage was to be consummated, after her family had delivered her to the home of her groom. The company of women who conveyed the bride would, instead of going back home, linger around while the groom struggled to have his maiden conjugal relations with his new wife. As the bride resisted and evaded the control of her groom, the women who were hanging around eavesdropping could even intervene to assist the groom. Among other things done on that night was to observe whether the bride was virgin, which would be discovered through the white bedsheet in which the couples slept on their first night. If some stains of blood were found after her first intimacy with the groom, then the bride was virgin. But if the bedsheet remained white, then she was not a virgin and it meant her family did not perform well the parental role of bringing up a modest girl, and this was a shame on them. This and other related practices which Afa Ajura fought were according to him, "socially immoral, sexually abusive, degrading to brides and grooms..." (36-39). As the translator further recounts, Afa Ajura was enormously successful in eradicating many of these irreligious and conservative cultural practices among Dagombas.

One correlation—the translator writes—to stopping the virginity test is the greater prevalence of premarital sex and illicit relationships among unmarried young men and women (40). Reformers in the spirit of Afa Ajura would likely be required to produce alternative practices that would checkmate the irreligious practice inherent in people's customs and simultaneously serve the moral purpose for which the customs were initially practiced.

Witchcraft is another venture that fell prey to Afa Ajura's reform mission. Ibrahim narrates how Afa Ajura used a threat of mobilizing formidable counterforce to resist the humiliation of women suspected of being witches were subjected into in Tamale. Apparently motivated by Islamic rejection of the industry of witchcraft and the process through which cases of witchcraft were treated among Dagomba people like in other African societies, and although he had composed a poem to condemn it, Afa Ajura here stressed the adoption of a physical threat to thwart the act of mortifying witchcraft suspects which centrally brought them to shame, psychological, and physical degradation. Interestingly, this method proved workable as the so-called witch hunters had stopped molesting women being blamed as witches in Afa Ajura's locality (48-49). While the main and primary approach of many reformers is largely known to be intellectual and less confrontational, at times a threat of adopting radical means to solve a problem in the interest of defenseless, poor masses has more potential of communicating and sending the desired message to the target recipients and concerned parties. Similarly, Afa Ajura condemned Islamic divination (*tibb*) which clerics turned into a means of exploiting people's wealth by not only attempting to solve people's health issues, but also claiming to offer "diagnosis, divination, and foretelling people's problems and then forecasting, prognosticating, and prescribing the outcomes and solutions of the issues" (51). As delineated by the translator, it "involves writing the combination of verses, God's names, or angels' names along lines and graphs on pieces of papers that are used to turn into charms and amulets" (51). Eventually, as he became a full reformist, Afa Ajura would stop his own participation in this practice and launch his polemics against it both in preaching and his poetry.

One of the sterling merits of the translator's narrative style is his success in providing a vivid, though imaginative picture of some of the events in the life and career of Afa Ajura vis-à-vis the latter's criticism of Sufism. Afa Ajura disagreed with the Tijjānīyah order in general, including the superfluously glorious virtues associated with its founder and saints. But his attack on the sect was triggered by the emergence of the Tijjānīyah-Ibrāhimīyah branch, which emphasized the mystical principle of *tarbiyah* (spiritual training), considered by critics to be as the highest step of perversion from orthodox Islam. In one debate on the topic, one Mallam Abdullai Maikano, a Tijāni cleric who frequently visited Tamale from eastern Ghana and was honorably received by Tijānis in Tamale, challenged Afa Ajura on *ṣalāt al-fātiḥ*. Maikano sought to trace the origin of *ṣalāt al-fātiḥ* in the Qur'an while Afa Ajura argued that it does not appear in Qur'an and at the same time proved to the audience the legitimate form of *ṣalāt* taught by Prophet Muhammad. Maikano followed a strategy of laboriously pinpointing the places where individual words that could be at the end used to make up *ṣalāt al-fātiḥ* appear in the Qur'an. This esoteric method appeared unintelligible to the audience, thus counterproductively confusing them (63-67).

In both his open air preaching and his poems, Afa Ajura spared no effort in vociferously contesting the virtues and merits attributed to some litanies of Tijjānīyah, particularly the *ṣalāt al-fātiḥ*, which is believed by many Tijānis to be 6,000 times more meritorious than reciting the Qur'an (60). Afa Ajura challenged and falsified the alleged physical contacts between Prophet Muhammad and Shaykh Ahmad Tijāni, which Afa Ajura simply dismissed as absurdly impossible (60). Afa Ajura's logic was to first establish, in his perspective, the absurdity and impossibility of the suspected encounter, which would then automatically refute all the litanies that were allegedly imparted on Shaykh Ahmad Tijāni by Prophet Muhammad. By the same token, this would refute the belief of many Tijānis that Prophet Muhammad used to physically appear during the performance of their rituals, particularly the litanies chanted congregationally on a daily or weekly basis.

As adequately vindicated by the translator in the book, Afa Ajura's reform richly manifests in poetry, which is another effective (mnemonic)

medium for the dissemination of the program. Ibrahim translated sixteen poems, which number about 153 pages, representing nearly the whole traceable poems in the available collection of Afa Ajura. 75 per cent of the poems are in the Dagbani language, while the remaining 25 in Arabic. The translator did not include the Hausa ones in this book. The poems, according to Ibrahim, “cover an array of topics with theological, social, polemical, and even genealogical information” (71).

The first of the poems, titled “*Damba Digoli* (Damba Month),” which supplies the genealogical hagiography of Prophet Muhammad, was composed by Afa Ajura when invited to a *mawlid* in 1952 in Tamale. In years to come, Afa Ajura would repudiate the practice of *mawlid* as a religious innovation that does not have a textual basis (71-72). The second poem, “*Dunya Binshaykam Dināra* (Everything in the World Shall Perish),” is, in the words of the translator, Afa Ajura’s “magnum opus”. Although it is silent about his attack on Tijjānīyah rituals, the poem seems to condense Afa Ajura’s reform views and intellectual contribution to spiritual, theological, socio-cultural, educational, and historical realms of Ghanaian Muslims. The translator’s outline of the dominant themes of this poem is especially informative and insightful (72-75). The third poem, “*Dolya Tidūma Nāwuni ŋun Namtiŋo* (Our Lord God, the Sole Creator, You Must Obey),” underlies the primary Muslim objective of worshiping God, but simultaneously upholds that this can only be achieved by properly acquiring religious knowledge and getting guidance from Prophet Muhammad through his speeches and the understanding of his companions. There is a mild attack on Tijjānīyah in the poem (75-76).

Poem 4, “*Afa Zāŋunpay Nyu Buyli* (Any Person Who Allows His Wife to Drink the Potion for Exorcism),” complements Afa Ajura’s effort at eradicating superstitious beliefs and practices, this time related to witchcraft. Women accused of being witches were forced to consume some potion as a process of exorcism and depriving them of their bewitching power. Afa Ajura passed a verdict that “anyone who drinks the exorcist potion: that two-month fasting becomes obligatory” (77). An alternative to the two-month fast which Afa Ajura provided in the poem is one hundred lashes, signifying that the matter was heinous enough

that an Islamic judge might be involved in the long run. Although the translator has made reference to the analogical basis for Afa Ajura's *ijtihād*, the *ijtihād* would remain controversial in the milieu of many jurists who would contest it and perhaps accuse Afa Ajura of bringing another "innovation". While noting the circumstance of Afa Ajura's *ijtihād*, Afa Ajura's hypothesis would yet be interpreted as an attempt to formulate a new legislation, an exercise that, as far as Islamic religion is concerned, could only be done by the Lawgiver.

The fifth poem, "*Fa Khudhū (And You Must Take)*," which is in Arabic and comprises over 80 verses, is Afa Ajura's response to his Tijāni detractors who labeled him and his followers as *munkirūn*, meaning the rejecters and deniers of beliefs and practices of Tijjāniyah (78). In the poem, Afa Ajura elaborated his contestation of Tijjāniyah *awrād* (litanies) and other Sufi beliefs (78-80). Poem 6, "*Kutilga (You Shall Not be Saved)*," is a spiritual counsel directed at Dagomba people to shun some customs that contradict Islamic teaching. It also censures some Tijāni practices and beliefs, and follows this with a caveat that insisting on the outlined irreligious customs and practices by Dagombas and Tijjāniyah adherents might deprive one from salvation in the hereafter. The poem establishes that rather than mundane influence, background or status, only piety and obedience to God would guarantee one eternal salvation (80-81). The seventh poem, "*Nsab Nsabliŋo (I Compose This Writing of Mine)*," is basically a narrative poem composed to recount Afa Ajura's participation in a Ghanaian delegation to join Nigeria in the celebration of the latter's independence from British in October 1960. The poem narrates some of the important events related to the occasion and key dignitaries that featured thereof, as well as mentions a few Nigerian ethnic groups and Nigerian cities (81-82).

Composed in 1965, "*Dolya Tidūma Ka Doli Anabŋo (Follow Our Lord and This Prophet)*", reiterates Afa Ajura's position on the essentialness of holding fast to the teaching of Prophet Muhammad and his Sunnah. It urges the audience to take the Prophet's companions as guide and model of achieving that. By the same token, Afa Ajura has, in the poem, launched his attack on the Tijānis, accusing them of deifying Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse, causing schism among the Muslim Umma and doing

other unbecoming things (82-83). Poem 9, “*Afa Nim Zāsa Nin Binya* (All Clerics Have Not Seen: Against *Wird*),” also attacks Tijjānīyah rituals, but with a focus on the unique litanies they chant. Calling on Muslims to shun Tijāni litanies, Afa Ajura also stresses that Muslims should adhere to the path of Prophet Muhammad and his companions (83-84). The tenth poem, which is in Arabic, “*Bukari Mawla* (a Eulogy),” is a threnody to commemorate the death of his favorite teacher, Shaykh Bukari Mawla, a Togolese who lived in Asamanseke in the eastern part of Ghana. The scholar was an acclaimed critic of Tijjānīyah, a reputation that brought him into conflict with the Tijāni establishment and culminated in his eventual arrest and abrupt death. In the elegy, Afa Ajura recognizes Bukari Mawla as a senior reformer and revivalist of the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad (84-85).

In poem 11, titled “*Ninsal Kutonya Tidūma* (A Human Being Cannot See Our Lord),” Afa Ajura expresses his criticism against the claim of his Tijāni rivals that they used to see God. This strong claim was one of the issues on which Afa Ajura would warn and dissuade Muslims from following Tijjānīyah. As readers can discern from the translator’s commentary, the strategy worked in favor of Afa Ajura’s mission since it cost Tijjānīyah many of their adherents (85-87). Although, as the title suggests, poem 12, “*Salli Salātan* (Send Blessings Upon),” is a panegyric rendition in honor of Prophet Muhammad, Afa Ajura weaves in his polemics against Tijjānīyah rituals. This is laid bare by his emphatic call on Muslims to solely rely and clutch onto the Qur’an and Hadith on one hand, implying that Tijānis do not do the same, and on the other hand, his vituperation against things associated with Tijjānīyah right from its shaykhs, litanies, etc. Afa Ajura employs a heavy language in the poem, as he compares the Tijānis with “the disbelievers and idols of several past generations” (87-88).

In the thirteenth poem, “*Tipayri Tidūma Nāwuni*” (We Thank Our Lord), Afa Ajura invites his audience to imagine a scenario of his engagements with a Tijāni rival. Afa Ajura censures this Tijāni interlocutor and charges him with forcing people to accept and follow Tijāni shaykhs and the litanies the latter formulated, while also extorting people economically (88-89). “*Ansarsi Māna* (He Mocks),” the fourteenth poem,

which is a code-mixture of Arabic and Dagbani, is the shortest poem of Afa Ajura. Women were intended to be the target audience. The poem simply preaches against some moral and social vices and tries to inculcate good manners so that they will in the hereafter be admitted to the gardens of Paradise. The poem is meant to replace the songs Dagomba women used to sing during occasions which, as Ibrahim observes, were often riddled with obscene and vulgar expressions. The poem tackles some irreligious practices that dominated the Dagomba ceremonies (89-90).

In contrast to the previous poem, poem 15, “*Nahnu Junūdu Habībinā* (We are the Army of Our Beloved),” which is a panegyric and expression of passionate loyalty to Prophet Muhammad, is meant to provide a song for collective recitation by school children “during plays and for entertainment” (90). Likewise, it was intended to deter pupils from getting attracted to songs sung in Sufi-oriented schools during occasions like *mawlid*, which Afa Ajura considered un-Islamic (90). The last poem in the book, “*Afanim Tola Ayirmo* (The Clerics Have Gone Wild),” is yet another literary encounter between Afa Ajura and Alhaji Muntaqa, a famous Tijāni cleric in northern Ghana. In the verses, Afa Ajura responds to Muntaqa’s polemics and the “direct insults” Muntaqa showered on Afa Ajura and his followers (90-92). In his commentary, the translator hints that Afa Ajura banned his followers from reciting the poem after the death of Muntaqa, and this informed why it has become less popular.

Afa Ajura significantly succeeded in his teaching initiatives, preaching, and religious reform mission. The Anbariyyah school he had founded had tremendously advanced and become the most progressive school in Tamale and probably the entirety of northern Ghana. The Anbariyya school grew from strength to strength, so much so that by 2010, “it had a total of four nurseries, twenty-five affiliated primary schools, two junior high schools, and one high school” (24). The school had established strategic connections and productive partnerships with scholars and institutions in Arab countries, such as the prestigious Azhar University and the Islamic University of Medina, as well as the Sudan. The school received a number of expatriates from these countries, whose tenure helped boost both its academic standard and national reputation.

Although the Tijjānīyah was the dominant affiliation of the majority of Muslims in Tamale when Afa Ajura started his preaching, his followers had, by the 1960s through the 1970s, outnumbered the adherents of Tijjānīyah (94), let alone other groups like the Qādirīyah or Shia (if any). Notably, both Afa Ajura and the translator are silent on Shiism.

Zakyyi Ibrahimī's work goes beyond a mere translation of Afa Ajura's poetry collections as depicted in the book. Rather, Ibrahim presents an extensive analytical overview and commentary of the state of contemporary Islamic thought in Northern Ghana, with hints on Muslim sectarian trends and the Dagomba customs. In this context, the Tijjānīyah order and syncretistic and cultural practices that dominated and permeated Dagomba Muslim life were challenged by a grand religious Sunni reform, which eventually prevailed against well entrenched socio-religious currents. Apart from the lucid translation and informative background for Afa Ajura's poems, an important feature of Ibrahim's work, which is essential in guiding the reader and carrying them along, is outlining the doctrinal arguments of the people and groups which Afa Ajura criticized, before highlighting and analyzing the latter's contestations and polemical responses. Interestingly, not only does Ibrahim disagree with some of Afa Ajura's views and conclusions, but also, as expected of an unbiased scholar, he mediates and balances some of Afa Ajura's accusations by pointing to other parties that also behaved in the same abominable manner. This indicates that the behavior resulted from the personal disposition of the actor, not necessary sprouting from their ideological persuasion. Notably, the book would have been more reflective of the first epithet in its title if a brief overview of the state and condition of Islamic thought in other African settings would have been provided.

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