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**The Mallam and “Mallamism” in Ghana: An  
Exploration of the Functions of Muslim Clerics  
in the Wa Municipality.**

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**Abstract**

In Islam, Muslim clerics are the heirs of the prophets. They represent a continuation of the prophetic traditions and functions in the Muslim community. These Muslim clerics are known as *mallams* in Ghana. Indeed, as heirs of the prophets, the *mallams* contribute towards promoting the wellbeing of the people in both the sacred and profane spaces. However, those clerics who participate in the production of spiritual goods and services are the only ones the general public refers to as *mallams*. The Ghanaian populace believes that the title *mallam* is the exclusive preserve of those who have the ability to manipulate the course of events as *mallam*. As a result, Ghanaians often ascribe ‘the unexpected’ to the works of the *mallams*. The *mallam* is, therefore, generally perceived as an exclusive agent of the spiritual. This paper explores aspects of the activities of the *mallam* in Ghana, using the Wa Muslim community as the site of exploration. The paper argues that although some of them render many spiritual services, dissemination of Islamic heritage is the main function of the *mallam*. The paper explains that the influence of the *mallam* in the past and their presence in the media in contemporary times together contribute to the perception about the *mallam* in Ghana today. It concludes that exclusively limiting the title to the spiritualist only is, therefore, not sustainable.

**Key words:**

Mystical, Esoteric, Exoteric, *Shaykh*, *Mallam*, Mystical Script and Formula

## Introduction

In Islam, Muslim clerics are the heirs of the prophets. The functions the prophets carried out among their people were to be continued by clerics of later generations. This is because of the fact that in Islam, "...the learned are the heirs of the Prophets ..."<sup>1</sup>. The requirement necessary for the 'heirship' status is acquisition of knowledge. With their knowledge, therefore, Muslim clerics continue to contribute across generations and in different degrees to the wellbeing of their communities. This is the state of affairs in Ghana today. Indeed, in the past, as the heirs of the prophets, Muslim clerics took part in the formation and development of many Ghanaian ethnic polities. They served as secretaries and took part in the bureaucracy of some Ghanaian kingdoms. They took part in the negotiations between some of these states and their foreign envoys<sup>2</sup>. They also participated in the founding and documenting the histories of the people<sup>3</sup>. Aside this aspect, they also provided spiritual services as they manufactured and sold amulets and talismans to the populace. These spiritual products were in demand everywhere in the communities. Royals and slaves patronized such products and services of the *mallam*<sup>4</sup>. Such talismans were viewed as efficacious by their proprietors for a number of ends including the cure of specific diseases, protection against the effect of the evil eye and protection from the effects of gunshots. The *mallams* used the Qur'ān as the source of their talismanic enterprise<sup>5</sup>. The spiritual aspect of their functions in that early stage and the extension of same into contemporary times seem to have constructed a unilineal identity for the *mallam* in public perception. The spiritual dimension has become a legacy that shapes and influences the perception of the Ghanaian, Muslim and non-Muslims alike, about the *mallam*. Notably in Ghana, the idea of a *mallam* is one who has the ability to spiritually

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<sup>1</sup>(Hadith No. 3634). Abu Dawud, Sunan Abi Dawud, (Damascus: Al-Resalah al-Alamiah, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> They took part in the negotiations between the British envoys and the Ashanti in 1820, Levtzion, N. Muslims and Chiefs in West Africa: a study of Islam in the middle Volta basin in the pre-colonial period. Oxford: the Clarendon press, 1968.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Dupuis observes on his visit to Kumasi friendship and trade relations with the Ashanti in the 19th century, D. O. Ansah, Islamic Talismanic Tradition in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Asante: Kumasi, (Edwin Mellen Press, 1991).

<sup>5</sup>D. O. Ansah, Islamic Talismanic Tradition in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Asante.

manipulate the course of events. As a result, occurrence of ‘the unexpected’ is often attributed to them. In some jurisdictions, like Europe, for example, in the game of football, a goal scored by a player (or a goal against the run of play) would be attributed to the effort of that player or the working of the tactics of the scoring team. However, in Ghana, such a goal would be thought not to have come through the skill of the player or tactics of the team but through the help of a *mallam*. Such goals are normally referred to as “*mallam* goals” in Ghanaian football parlance. As a Liverpool Fan, I had a discussion with a Chelsea fan on the 15<sup>th</sup> march 2019 about the upcoming English Premier League fixtures. We agreed that the Everton-Chelsea match was the toughest fixture of the week. When, however, I suggested that it was Everton who exposed the weaknesses of Jurgenhno of Chelsea F.C. in the first fixture, the Chelsea fan responded that “but for Divoc Origi’s *mallam* goal, Liverpool F.C. could not have beaten Everton F.C in the first Mersey side derby fixture”<sup>6</sup>. It clear from this conversation that some Ghanaians even extend the *mallam* goal parlance to the European context.

Indeed, the public perception about the place of the *mallam* in football matters even finds expression and relevance on national discussions. Though exonerated of the allegations, one of the accusations labelled against a Ghanaian Sports Minister was the issue of misallocation of the ministry’s funds to rent the services of a *mallam* for black stars, Ghana’s senior football team. He was alleged to have “requested GH¢1,000 per match for the services of a ‘*mallam*’ (spiritualist) and demanded cash immediately for the purpose”<sup>7</sup>. This is the extent to which the *mallam* popularly thought about in Ghana. He wields a lot of power in the Ghanaian public space. While some of the functions are no longer under the domain of the *mallams*, the operation of many other functions still continues to unfold under them. They still disseminate the Islamic heritage and provide spiritual goods and services to the general public. It is, however, the spiritual functions that permeate the public discourse. The spiritual functions’ permeation of the the public discourse is a reflection and a re-living of the memories of *mallamism* in the past as pointed out earlier (page. 2). In addition to this, the advertisement of the spiritual

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<sup>6</sup>A conversation with Ofori-Atta, Wa, Ghana.

<sup>7</sup>This was alleged and reported to CHRAJ by a pressure group called Progressive Nationalist Forum

(PNF) <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Muntaka-faces-CHRAJ-over-pampers-194079>. He, however, was exonerated by the Commission for Human Rights and Administrative Justice <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/CHRAJ-clears-Muntaka-198477> (11th march 2019).

*mallams* of their services on both the print and the electronic media play a role in shaping the perceptions of the people about who a *mallam* and his functions are. Indeed, the spiritual *mallams* now use sign-boards and social media platforms to advertise their services and send request for friendship to members of the general public<sup>8</sup>. One participant has this to say about the *mallams'* use of the social media:

In 2018, I received a friendship request from a *mallam* through Facebook. Of the services he raised to entice me were the promise to help me secure love, riches and good employment. He told me he could make me an example of success among my peers. But I declined the offer.

This response points to the media as one of the means the spiritual *mallams* use in peddling their goods and services among a section of Ghanaians. The use of such means of communication is potent enough to shape the people's perception of the spiritual *mallams* as the ones to whom the title *mallam* is exclusively applicable.

Beyond the popular conception of the *mallam*, this paper explores another form of "*mallamism*"<sup>9</sup> from the Islamic point of view. This exploration examines the phenomenon of "*mallamism*," explaining the etymology of the term, the requirements and the training that qualifies one as a *mallam*. It also assesses some of the activities the *mallams* carry out in the Ghanaian community, using the Qur'ān as the main point of reference. The paper explores these issues with primary data from both the insiders' and public perspectives, with the hope of bridging the gap between the popular perception and clerical conception of the phenomenon. It is to be noted that the popular perception in the use of the title for the spiritually oriented *mallam* is not a misconception. The misconception is the exclusive narrowing and limiting of the title *mallam* and his functions to the spiritual one only. As indicated above, this narrowing of the identity of the *mallam* is pervasive in the Ghanaian community so much so that when the word *mallam* is mentioned, it is thought and believed to be referring to the one associated with spiritual powers. This misconception is one that is based and fuelled by the presence the spiritual one enjoys in the

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<sup>8</sup>Ama Kofi interview, 2018. Five other respondents of 3 females and 2 males pointed out how they received through facebook request for friendship from *mallams* who promised them many opportunities.

<sup>9</sup>"*Mallamism*" is used in the paper to refer to the activities carried out by the *mallam*.

Ghanaian media<sup>10</sup> as indicated earlier. To better reflect the opinions of the participants, the descriptive method has been adopted in data presentation. Also for purposes of confidentiality, pseudonyms are used to represent the respondents in lieu of their real names. The Wa municipality serves as the research context and entry point into the discussions. The Wa municipality is the capital town of the Upper West Region. Its population is 107, 214 representing 15.3 percent of the total population of the Upper West Region (702,110)<sup>11</sup>. It is through the eyes of this community that the current paper enters into the discussion of the issue.

### ***Mallam: An Etymology***

The term *mallam*<sup>12</sup> is a Hausa word which refers to a learned man or a doctor. It is often used as a title as in *mallam* Muhammad. It is the Hausa corruption of the Arabic word *mu'allim*. *Mu'allim* in Arabic means a teacher, instructor, or master<sup>13</sup>. The *mallam* is a learned man or woman<sup>14</sup> who teaches others that which he or she has learnt. He or she teaches and guides towards good moral values and virtue. As the people's teacher, the Prophet of Islam describes the *mu'allim* in such terms as: "The best among you (Muslims) are those who learn the Qur'an and teach it<sup>15</sup>". The *mu'allim* has been described also as one who invites people to Islam, teaches people the Islamic heritage

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<sup>10</sup>While majority of Ghanaians hold the one-sided perception about the *mallam*, nevertheless, few have the right perception of the concept even Christians. For instance, responding to Radio and Television show host Deloris Frimpong Manso on the programme 'The Delay Show', Asamoah Gyan (captain of the Ghana senior national team) argues that "the public has demonized the use of 'Mallams' in sports. He explains that 'Mallams' are the equivalents of pastors but in Islam. Therefore, an individual could consult them for prayer. <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/I-consult-Mallams-Pastors-Asamoah-Gyan-549743>(accessed:11th march 2019)

<sup>11</sup>Details of the Muslim population in the municipality had not been provided by the national population census.2010 Population & Housing Census National Analytical Report, Ghana Statistical Service May, 2013 <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/274696661>.

<sup>12</sup>C. H, Robinson, *Dictionary of the Hausa language*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1913).

<sup>13</sup>H. A. Wehr, *dictionary of modern written Arabic*, ed. Cowan, J.M, (London: Macdonald & Evans Ltd, 1980).

<sup>14</sup>A common adjectival form *mallamah* is occasionally used for women. Robinson, *Dictionary of the Hausa language*.

<sup>15</sup>Sahih al-Bukhari, Book 66, Hadith 49 <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/66/49>(accessed:25th February, 2014).

and the ways of Allah<sup>16</sup>. This provides a functional description of the *mu'allim* in society<sup>17</sup>.

The functions attributed to the *mu'allim* above, place on him or her, the burden of acquiring some specific requirements that qualify him or her as a *mu'allim/mah*. Indeed, the part of the text cited above "learn the Qur'ān and teach it" is evidence for the acquisition of such requirements and qualifications. For this reason, some requirements for the attainment of the title *mu'allim*, have been provided below:

### **Requirements of Muslim Clerics**

Scholars<sup>18</sup> of Islamic jurisprudence (*usūlal-fiqh*)<sup>19</sup> address the issue of the requirements of a level of Muslim clerics under juristic reasoning (*ijtihād* or *mujtahid*)<sup>20</sup>. To these scholars, for the status of *mujtahid*, a person should acquire knowledge of the Qur'ān, the Sunnah and the related sciences. He or she must be equipped with the knowledge of the science of Hadīth, Arabic language, and also be aware of existing intellectual conventions and consensus, as well as areas of contention among the early scholars. It should, however, be noted that although scholars agree on the necessity of the acquisition of some requirements, the specific requirements that are needed are a matter of contention<sup>21</sup> and varied ones have, therefore, been prescribed. Al-Zarnūjī mentions intelligence, motivation, patience and commitment, financial resources, teacher's inspiration and determination, and commitment to time as the necessary requirements<sup>22</sup>. Al-Zarnūjī's requirements pay particular attention to the external resources that can boost the morale and help the candidate *mu'allim* in his acquisition of knowledge. These represent some qualifications Islamic literature require of the office of the *mu'allim* in Islam.

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<sup>16</sup>Ibn Mohammed, (interviewed in Wa, 15<sup>th</sup> June 2018). The interviewee is a popular learned man in Wa. He was trained locally and also returned from overseas for further studies in 2003. He officiates over a lot of social activities. He also a Friday imam of one of the schools mosque of a suburb in town.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Like A. N. Biqāi, *Al-Ijtihad fi Ilmil-Hadith wa Atharuhufil-Fiqh al-Islami*, (Beirut: Dar Albashair, 1998), and al-Ghazali, *Al-Mustasfā* (Beirut: Dar Ihya al-Tourath al Arabi, 1997).

<sup>19</sup>principles of Islamic jurisprudence.

<sup>20</sup>The human reasoning and judgment.

<sup>21</sup>A.A. An-Na'im, *Islam and the secular state: Negotiating the future of Shari'a*, (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2009).

<sup>22</sup>Huda, M. Yusuf J. B, Jasmi, K.A. and Zakaria G.N. *Understanding comprehensive learning requirements in the light of al Zarnūjī's Ta'lim al-Muta'allim* SAGE open: 2016) (<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage>) (accessed: 8<sup>th</sup> June, 2018).

In the West African context, a vital aspect of Muslim literacy is the “preparation and sale of charms”<sup>23</sup>. Islamic Literacy in the Muslim community is dominated by two main traditional orientations of training: the exoteric and the esoteric traditions. While the exoteric (*Zāhir*), concerns with literal forms of scriptural learning, the esoteric (*Bātin*), focuses on the mystical ways of learning. At the exoteric level of learning, the focus is on the literal aspect of teaching students to read and write in the Arabic language. Part of this is “the mechanical repetition and memorisation of the Qur’ānic passages”<sup>24</sup>. Here, the apprentice *mallam* receives training from a *Shaykh* on specialized fields of Arabic language, Qur’ānic sciences, Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and similar specialised subject areas. Having received training in these sciences on the local scene, going abroad for further and advanced training adds more value to the career of the candidate<sup>25</sup>. These are some of the requirements and functions that are associated with the office of the non-spiritual *mallam*.

For the esoteric system of learning, it is a system that believes that the literal knowledge of the Qur’ān is not adequate without knowledge in the mystical values of the Qur’ānic words, numbers and letters (mystical arithmetic and numerology). Thus, the focus of the esoteric is mystical literacy. In this aspect, the apprentice *mallam* learns to use Qur’ānic verses to generate mystical texts. He also learns how to chant some *adhkār*<sup>26</sup>. Through this process and training, the apprentice traverses the path towards becoming a mystic<sup>27</sup>, where his vocation assumes spiritual outlook and effect. Having become a mystic, he, like his master, would now have people come to him for consultation and solution to their problems<sup>28</sup>. But becoming a mystic would not have been the end of it. He would have to continue learning from much more experienced mystics in order to enrich or perfect his activities<sup>29</sup>. It is assumed that students who successfully graduate from this aspect of training are perceived as having attained the ability to understand and use the knowledge to carry out many spiritual functions in their communities<sup>30</sup>. When a

<sup>23</sup>D. O. Ansah, *Islamic Talismanic Tradition in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Asante: Kumasi*. (Edwin Mellen Press, 1991).

<sup>24</sup>Ansah, *Islamic Talismanic Tradition*, 18.

<sup>25</sup>Ibn Mohammed.

<sup>26</sup>It refers to formulae for celebrating and praising God.

<sup>27</sup>Mysticism is a form of Islam in which practitioners seeks the wisdom of the divine.

<sup>28</sup>This category of the *mallamis* one that in line with the perception of the perception of Ghanaian as the sole category of the term.

<sup>29</sup>The name given to this category of training is *Sirraor ilmul-Asrār* (science of secrets).

<sup>30</sup>Ansah, *Islamic Talismanic Tradition*, 18.



novel issue confronts a *mallam* during practice, for which he has no knowledge, he consults the more experienced ones for mystical assistance and guidance<sup>31</sup>. Any assistance or guidance the *mallams* receive from such a consultation of the highly experienced mystics adds value and depth to their vocation<sup>32</sup>. Some of the functions they carry out include divination, amulets and charm making and many other activities of spiritual inclinations. These are some of the requirements and functions of the office of the spiritual *mallam*.

Unlike the exoteric *mallam*, the data shows that there are no clear and specific scientific syllabi, the acquisition of which qualifies one as an esoteric cleric (mystic). It also shows that, the training of both the exoteric and esoteric *mallam* is a continues process as they never stop learning. However, both the spiritual (esoteric) and the non-spiritual (exoteric) *mallams* contribute in different ways to fulfil the needs of the people. And their contributions are examined here. In this paper, however, the functions that are deeply connected with the Qur'ān are the only ones to be attended to. This is for reasons of uniformity and giving equal expressions of the activities and experiences of both aspects of *mallamism*. And these are discussed below:

### **Functions of the Exoteric Clerics**

The exoteric *mallam* performs many functions in relation to the Qur'ān. He or she interprets the Qur'ān, uses it in preaching (*da'wah* in Arabic) and also during naming ceremonies, funerals and weddings<sup>33</sup>.

### **The clerics as Teachers**

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<sup>31</sup>Ibn Sulayman, (interviewed in Wa, 1<sup>st</sup> June 2018). The respondent is a known spiritual cleric in town. People from all walks of life consult him and patronize his services. He has acquired a lot of fame and property from the spiritual activities. He indicates that it is not every human problem that has a corresponding solution in the mystical scripts; some of them are stored in the minds of the great spiritual clerics. The fact of the matter is that these mystical sciences are not revealed sciences. They are formulated and recorded down by holy mystics to serve as guiding texts for future users. The greatness of a cleric lies in his/her ability to manipulate the mystical scripts and formulae for purposes other than what they have originally crafted for.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

<sup>33</sup>It has to be pointed out here that women are becoming partners in this aspect of *mallamism* in the community. They perform *dawah* during weddings and funeral grounds to counsel the general public on matters concerning these areas of life.

The exoteric *mallams* teach the Qur'ān and other religious sciences to students and the Muslim community. The process focuses on teaching the trainees to appreciate the mechanical reciting and memorisation of the Qur'ān or some chapters of it. This aspect focuses on imparting the science of *tajwīd*, the methods and skills of reciting and memorizing the verses and chapters of the Qur'ān. The rationale behind this method of teaching is to enable students carry out religious rituals<sup>34</sup>properly<sup>35</sup>. In this system, there are normally no classrooms for students. Students receive their training at the feet of the masters, sitting on wooden benches and or mats. The teaching takes place in mosques, under trees and open places. Hence, students are not segregated into various classrooms to reflect their stages of learning. In this situation, the Qur'ānic chapters, up to which the students have learnt, serve as their level or stage of education in that system. Students learning the recitation of a particular chapter of the Qur'ān are, therefore, grouped together as students of one class or stage. Even in some where there are classroom blocks, which is very rare, this kind of grouping still takes place. In this system of learning, the *mallams* would not teach a student the recitation of a verse, verses or a chapter unless the student shows mastery of the previous lesson(s)<sup>36</sup>. The primary goal and purpose of this kind of teaching is to get the student equipped with the ability to recite only the letter of the Qur'ān from cover to cover and perform the Muslim daily ritual prayer with the needed level of proficiency. It does not pay attention to the interpretation and meaning of the Qur'ān (*tafsīr*). But *Tafsīr*, exegesis of the Qur'ān, is one of the subject areas the *mallams* teach the community.

### *Tafsīr of the Qur'ān*

*Tafsīr*<sup>37</sup>is the way clerics use the local language to interpret the Qur'ān. The interpretation usually takes place on Fridays and especially in the month of Ramadan. The audience gather in and outside the mosques and students of the clerics read the Qur'ānic verses to be interpreted. The verses are normally not chosen for their thematic value. It is the organic interpretation of the Qur'ān, verse by verse and chapter by chapter. In fact the idea is to have the

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<sup>34</sup>Like the five daily prayers.

<sup>35</sup>*Ahkāmūt-Tajwīdul-Qur'ān* are the principles of reading the Qur'ān with excellence.

<sup>36</sup>This was very common in all the five centres I observed in the municipality.

<sup>37</sup>*Tafsīr* is a platform where Muslim clerics make their opinions on various verses of the Qur'an known to the general public. Abdul-Hamid, M. *The Afa* as a pivot of Dagomba participation in the Islamic tradition (Unpublished M.Phil thesis). Cape Coast: University of Cape Coast, 2003.

whole Qur'ān interpreted. Thus, the clerics start the interpretation from the opening chapter of the Qur'ān called *al-Fātihah*, and where they stop, they would continue in the next meeting. Where the students have read the verse(s) to, the cleric would interpret it, noting especially the most important words on which hinge the meanings of the verse(s). Where the issue is about a law such as marriage, alms giving etc. the cleric would explain its import<sup>38</sup>. The activities of this category of the *mallams* play out largely at the community level. They do not get much involved in the media. For that reason, they do not get the comparative attention of the general public as their 'colleagues'. Indeed, some section of the general public is not aware of the application of the term (*mallam*) to this category of personnel<sup>39</sup>. Various terms, such as Muslim clerics and the Imam, maybe used to refer to the non-spiritual *mallams*. Responding to the question of the title and identity of a cleric officiating a wedding in Wa, some participants had this to say: "He is the officiator", "the presiding officer" and "the Imam". When I referred to him as a *mallam*, some respondents were dismayed. One of the respondents remarked that: "But this is not the work of the *mallam* we see or hear about in the media!" For them, "a *mallam* is a spiritualist and a Muslim medicine man"<sup>40</sup>. It is clear from these submissions that the non-spiritual *mallams* are not known as *mallams* to some members of the general public. It also shows the extent to which the media is reflecting and influencing at the same time the people's ideas about who a *mallam* and his functions in the Ghanaian community are.

### Functions of the Esoteric Clerics

Besides the literal forms of learning discussed above, some of the clerics carry out other functions that are deemed spiritual. These functions are performed by the esoteric clerics (the only ones the public refers to as *mallams*). One of such functions is the clerics' use of the Qur'ān in their intercessory and petitionary enterprise with Allah<sup>41</sup>. Such petitionary prayers are offered by the clerics (*mallams*) either independently or collectively. This happens when a client solicits for an intercessory prayer from the clerics for success in his or her undertaking: trade, politics, marriage, education and others.

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<sup>38</sup>The Ghanaian perception of the *mallam* does not include the activities of the esoteric one (the non-Sufi oriented).

<sup>38</sup>Kinsley and Kwasi came from southern Ghana to attend the wedding of a friend in Wa on the 12th June 2018.

<sup>39</sup>Ibn Mohammed.

In petitioning Allah on behalf of the clients, the clerics either recite the whole Qur'ān or selected chapters of it like *Yāsīn*(Q.36)<sup>42</sup> or *Wāqī'at*<sup>43</sup>. The choice of their chanting the whole or selected chapters of the Qur'ān is not done at random. It is largely influenced by the virtues attributed to the chosen<sup>44</sup>. It has to be, however, noted that immediate material benefits are not always the reason and motivation for the prayer. It is also sought and offered for non-material benefits<sup>45</sup>. For instance, some communities<sup>46</sup> solicit petitionary prayers from the clerics for blessing for themselves and for their progeny and future generations. The purpose and motivation for this kind of prayer is to seek generational prosperity from Allah through the clerics. The petitionary prayers are usually accompanied by animal sacrifice. When the petitionary prayer involves the recitation of the whole Qur'ān, a cow is slaughtered as a sacrifice to Allah and the meat is distributed as may be directed by the clerics.

### The Procedure of the Prayer

Petitioning Allah using the recitation of the Qur'ān or any of its chapters has its own procedure. This is especially the case when the petitionary prayer is to be offered by a group of clerics. Before the prayer, a presiding cleric gives the Qur'ān to the client (beneficiary) to make his or her intention (*niyyah*) silently while holding the Qur'ān. After concluding the intention, the beneficiary returns the Qur'ān to the presiding cleric who then assigns portions<sup>47</sup> of it to participant and assisting clerics at the prayer session. At this point, the presiding cleric initiates the recitation by asking for *solī* (supplicatory eulogy) on the Prophet Muhammad. After this, amidst the silence and attention of the participating clerics, the

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<sup>42</sup>Qur'ān: 36.

<sup>43</sup>Qur'ān: 56.

<sup>44</sup>For the whole Qur'ān, the Prophet is reported to have said that: "... those persons who assemble in the house among the houses of Allah (mosques) and recite the book of Allah... there will descend upon them tranquillity and mercy and the angels will surround them". For *Yāsīn*, the Prophet is reported as saying "Everything has a heart and the heart of the Qur'ān is *Yāsīn*. Anyone who reads it, God will write down for him ten readings of the Qur'ān.

<sup>45</sup> See: R. I. Adebayo, *Celebrating the Dead: A Phenomenological Study of Janazah Practice Among Selected Muslim Organisations in Osun State, Nigeria*, In *Oguaa Journal of Religion and Human Values*, Vol.3, 2014), 47.

<sup>46</sup>Ibn Habib, interviewed in Wa, 18<sup>th</sup> June 2018. He is a learned man who received training from the local and abroad terrains. He is also an imam in one of the Friday mosques in town. He preaches at various social functions and radio stations.

<sup>47</sup>Such Qur'āns are either originally printed in pieces or the pages are removed into various pieces by the clerics for such purposes.

presiding cleric then starts the recitation of the Qur'ān from chapter one up to verse five (5) of chapter two, from where the rest of the clerics in unison start the recitation of the various verses, chapters or pages of the Qur'ān assigned to them. Each cleric concentrates on reciting or chanting his portion from the beginning to the end of the pages of the Qur'ān available to them. Clerics who are fast enough to finish early with the recitation of their assigned portions assist the relatively slow ones to finish theirs. When all the assisting and assisted clerics finish, then the presiding cleric concludes the session by reciting the closing prayer (*Du'āuKhat'mul-Qur'ān*)<sup>48</sup>. These are the procedures involved when the petitionary prayer requires the recitation of the whole Qur'ān.

However, when the petition requires the recitation of only one chapter of the Qur'ān, like *Yāsīn*, the presiding cleric initiates the recitation from the actual head or beginning of the chapter<sup>49</sup>. In this case, the assisting clerics join in the recitation when the presiding *mallam* gets to verse 11 of the chapter (Q: 36). The chapter is normally recited for a designated number of times, after which the presiding cleric recites its supplication<sup>50</sup>. Finally, to mark the end of the exercise, the individual clerics offer *Duāu* (supplication)<sup>51</sup>, one after the other. In some cases, as the situation may dictate, the presiding cleric gives the opportunity to only a handful number of the clerics for the *Duāu* (supplication). When they are done, the presiding cleric concludes the session with a prayer for the Prophet Muhammad once again. Proceedings properly come to an end after the fee or honorarium paid by the client and beneficiary of the prayer has been shared among all participating clerics in the session<sup>52</sup>.

Besides the group-based form of prayer described above, individual clerics use the Qur'ān to manipulate and influence the 'natural course'<sup>53</sup> of events. They generate mystical texts and formulae from the Qur'ānic text. They believe in the efficacy of such mystical texts and formulae in bringing about effects and outcomes

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<sup>48</sup>Supplication after the recitation of the whole Qur'ān.

<sup>49</sup>Qur'ān:36.

<sup>50</sup>From a document called *Duāul-Fauzul-Azim* (literally means the supplication for great victory). This document contains the supplication of *Sūrat Yāsīn* and other supplementary prayers.

<sup>51</sup>Supplication.

<sup>52</sup> Some non-spiritual *mallams* also do this when it has to do with only the recitation of the Qur'ān in plain terms and without the addition spiritual formulae.

<sup>53</sup>P. J. Ryan, *Imale: Yoruba participation in Muslim tradition*, (Missoula Montana: Edwards and Brothers Inc.,1978).

clients desire to achieve<sup>54</sup>. This means, therefore, that both the general public and the *mallams* themselves share a common faith in the efficacy of the mystical interventions of the spiritual clerics. For these *mallams*, although reciting or using the letter of the Qur'ānic verses in their official or original form may elicit reward from Allah, it may not yield the required mystical effect from it. The recitation of *Sūratul-Wāqī'at*<sup>55</sup>, for instance, is known by many to be recipe and a precursor for the causation of good fortunes. This, however, is only when the chapter is unlocked and recited mystically. For the chapter (*Wāqī'at*) to grant good fortune, it has to be recited from a particular point or verse<sup>56</sup> in the middle up to another point, and then restart its recitation all over from the beginning to the end. It is only when it is recited this way that the chapter works for the good fortune it is believed to be causal and potent of. This is one of the methods the *mallams* use to effect change in the life of their clients and manipulate nature. This depends on the ability of the *mallam* to mystically exploit the Qur'ān to his advantage. Despite the fact that "the ability to effect change is the very definition of power<sup>57</sup>" the claim of the ability of these methods in changing and manipulating nature cannot be scientifically ascertained or proven<sup>58</sup>. The belief, however, in the power of the *mallam* to effect change in the life of the people is a well-known thing in Ghana in general and Wa in particular. Although the efficacy of the mystical methods is difficult to prove scientifically, it boosts the morale and psychology of the practitioners and clients in their various endeavours<sup>59</sup>. Though originally and technically referring to learned men in Islam, the term *mallam* has assumed a broader meaning and application. The examination of the requirements, training and functions of the *mallams* has shown that the title "*mallam*" has developed into a generic term that applies for both the spiritual and the non-spiritual

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<sup>54</sup>Ibn Zakariya, (interviewed in Wa, 12<sup>th</sup> June 2018. He is a known spiritual oriented *mallam* in Wa who earns his living from esoteric activities. Market men and women and politicians consult him for prosperity in their respective undertakings.

<sup>55</sup>Qur'ān: 56.

<sup>56</sup>He refused to disclose it to researcher.

<sup>57</sup>Laura S. Grillo, "When you make sacrifice, no one is a stranger": Divination, sacrifice and identity among translocals in the West African urban Diaspora, In *Religion crossing boundaries: transnational religious and social dynamics in Africa and the new African diaspora*, Ed. AfeAdogame and James V. Spickard (Leiden: Brill 2010,155).

<sup>58</sup>Abdul-Hamid, M. and Adam, A. A, a public lecture presented in the Faculty of Arts conference room on the role of the sufi in political campaigns of Ghana, (University of Cape Coast: Faculty of Arts, 2018).

<sup>59</sup>Ibid.

clerics. Its exclusive application to only the spiritual one is, therefore, inaccurate.

## Conclusion

The paper explored the issue of *mallam* and “*mallamism*” in Ghana, using Wa, the capital town of the Upper West Region of Ghana as the study area. It examined the definition of the phenomenon and requirements candidates fulfil in order to qualify as clerics (*mallam*) in the Muslim community. It points out participation in state bureaucracies, taking part in state negotiations and serving as envoys as some of the functions the clerics carried out in the past<sup>60</sup>. The provision of spiritual goods and services is also pointed out as one of the services the *mallams* rendered and continue to render to the Ghanaian general public. The endurance and presence of the *mallam* in the Ghanaian media led to a perception about the *mallam* as one whose singular vocation is the manipulation of nature. He is one who does ‘the unexpected’. The paper argues that while such a perception of the clerics by the large section of Ghanaians, Muslims and non-Muslims, is not entirely out of place, the tentacles of the clerics go beyond that domain. Indeed, the functions of the non-spiritual *mallam*, which include teaching and exegesis of the Qur’ān, support the current position. The paper also establishes that the phenomenon is no longer exclusively limited to men. Women are also now participating in the experience and the use of the feminine title, “*malamah*” has also become a common term in the Ghanaian Muslim community. Therefore, further studies can be conducted on the gender dimension of the issue.

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<sup>60</sup>They took part in the negotiations between the British envoys and the Ashanti in 1820, Levtzion, N. Muslims and Chiefs in West Africa: a study of Islam in the middle Volta basin in the pre-colonial period. Oxford: the Clarendon press, 1968.