ARIADNE AUF NAXOS:
ISLAM AND POLITICS IN A RELIGIOUSLY
PLURALISTIC AFRICAN SOCIETY

BY

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Overture: Ariadne auf Naxos

In his autobiographical memoir, *The End of Religion*, Dom Aelred Graham remarks that ‘academic professors of religion are curiously prone to take in each other’s theological washing, often in the form of more or less thinly disguised doctoral theses.’! Guilty as I am of the sin excoriated by the genteel British Benedictine, I wish to repent. It also strikes me that the topic of this paper may be approached as an opera in two acts, but not an ordinary opera, because there are two plots. The brilliant opera of Richard Strauss, *Ariadne auf Naxos*, may serve as a paradigm. The impresario planning to stage an opera in the first act tries out two very different ones in a rehearsal with the shirt-sleeved orchestra. One is a harlequinade, the other a grand opera in the heroic mode, the story of Ariadne abandoned by Theseus to her lonely exile on the island of Naxos. He eventually stages both, combined in Act II. While Ariadne laments her abandonment, the principal female harlequin, Zerbinetta, tries to cheer her up with the thought that there are other fish in the sea. The good sense of Zerbinetta is vindicated by the arrival not of Death but of Bacchus, god of wine and ecstasy, to rescue Ariadne.

A study of Islam and politics in Ghana, the religiously pluralistic African society of the title, also involves two conflicting but ironically complementary plots, schemata that no ordinary impresario would combine. On the one hand, the bearers of the Muslim religious tradition have penetrated the area of modern Ghana for at least as long as they have penetrated the northern half of Nigeria. But the progress of Islam in Ghana (principally the former Northern Territories, now the Upper West, Upper East and Northern Regions) has not equalled the progress
of Islam in Nigeria, and especially in northern Nigeria (principally the states that make up Nigeria’s northern border with the Republic of Niger). Islam in Ghana, like Ariadne, has had to contend with a very vigorous commedia dell’arte: religiously sanctioned but non-Islamic political developments, traditional or modern. The resulting dialectic has softened Islam in Ghana and invigorated the model of chieftaincy in government, some would say to the benefit of both. Others would say to the detriment of both, but not everyone likes the operas of Richard Strauss either.

With that statement of the principal themes, the curtain rises on Act I.

Act I: Rehearsal for an Operatic Dialectic

Nehemia Levtzion’s masterly study of Islam in pre-colonial northern Ghana and its immediately adjacent environs (the mysteriously geographical ‘Middle Volta Basin’) describes the varying relationships between Islam and chieftaincy in several traditional areas: Gonja, Dagomba and Ashanti, among others. No two areas have exactly the same relationship, and the variations demonstrate that, at least in the pre-colonial period, Islam found no easy victory over the religiously sanctioned traditions of centralized rule in these areas.

A. The Gonja, for instance, have contained Muslims in a position of honor but one that excludes them from real power in chieftaincy affairs. As an ‘over-kingdom,’ in Jack Goody’s phrase, the social structure in the Gonja chieftaincies (in the present-day Northern Region of Ghana) consists of three strata. (1) The NGbanya, the ruling class, trace their descent from a stereotypical Mande warrior, Ndewura Jakpa, possibly a Bambara, who invaded this area with his followers around the sixteenth century. The NGbanya today may be described religiously as partly Traditionalist and partly Muslim. Linguistically, the NGbanya now speak a Guan language related to that of other Guan-speakers in southern Ghana, having lost their original Mande language over many generations through the process of intermarriage with local peoples who far out-numbered the invaders who had overwhelmed them militarily. (2) Most of those ruled by the NGbanya are called Nyemasi (Nyamasi), ethnically diverse autochthonous populations. The various people so denominated by the NGbanya today think of themselves more in terms of their various tribal particularities: the Vagala, Nawuri, et al. The Nyemasi peoples, unless they have intermarried (which many do)