

SIGNIFICANCE OF WRITTEN AND ORAL
TRADITIONS IN THE SOCIAL ORGANIZATION
OF THE WALA

My investigation aims at concentrating on the important function that the inter-related oral traditions, history and religion have as both an expression of unity as well as that of social divisiveness amongst the Wala community at Wa, Northern Ghana.

The Wala people are a heterogeneous group whose background can be traced to the conquering Dagomba, Mamprussi and Muslim Mande peoples of the sixteenth century. Till now, the Walas claim no differences in the cultural traditions between themselves and the latter groups. Thus, it could be inferred that the Wala culture does not have clearly defined characteristics of its own. Yet, it has become increasingly clear to me during the intermittent eight weeks that I have spent at Wa that oral and Islamic traditions have a considerable sociological and psychological significance in the present life of the community. An understanding of the Wala characteristic traits (what are their cultural boundaries as distinct from that of their origins?) can only be viewed from a study of the function of their oral and religious traditions which respectively express stability and change in the community.

It could be said that the existence of the Wala people was, from the very start, based on cultural assimilation and acculturation. Arriving as conquerors, these different peoples settled and spread among other cultural groups, intermarried, integrated and united by calling themselves Wala thus expressing a cultural and social cohesiveness. Yet, to borrow a terminology from Redfield, this led to a "great tradition" inter-

acting with a "little tradition" - that is, a literate, historical and more universal tradition essentially religious, lending prestige to the community, and a local tradition expressing the 'basic' culture of the society. A social and psychological consideration of the two traditions (the reflective versus the unreflective) will lead to a greater understanding of the role that culture contacts and Islam had on the social organization of the community.

A social hierarchy evolved amongst the Wala, not only within Wa itself with its Wala quarters - twenty in all - but also between the town and the surrounding and scattered Wala villages, and this seems to be essentially based on genealogy and religious traditions though added to this is modern education and Islamic teachings.

Wa is the center for the Paramount Chief of the Wala whose population is approximately 130,000 (1960 census). The town itself - of 16,000 inhabitants - is clearly settled according to cultural groupings. Having made a detailed plan of the town, I found it distinctly divided into two sections. In the north are the Wala and in the South, the "foreigners" - the Lobis, Gonjas, Dagatis, Hausas and other cultural groups some of which had long been settled in Wa. The original inhabitants of Wa, called Sukpayiri, live in that section and are the Tindambas or landowners thus playing an important function in the political (distribution) and religious (protection) concerns dealing with the land. Yet, they consider themselves and are considered now as Wala though their origin is distinctly different and it seems that marriages between the "real" Walas and themselves are infrequent. Each of the Wala quarters then has its own genealogy, its tradition of origins and is consequently placed in a separate social position in

the complex political and religious organization of the community. For example, the Limamyiri quarter, where the religious leader resides, could be considered as the intellectual elites of the town and a girl marrying within that quarter would heighten the prestige of her own family. The Nayiri quarter is the political leader for it is there that the Princes live and they hold an important function in the Wa Na's (the Chief's) court. On the other hand, since the 1930's, a new Islamic movement was introduced (now without a civil war erupting) and brought a third level in the social organisation of the town. It is the liberal Ahmaddiya movement (hailing from Pakistan) which also set up its own leaders, mosques, schools and quarters and many individuals were either banned from or have broken ties with their original family quarters.

All these are factions that have brought about conflicts within the Wala community in Wa. Yet, a unity and cohesiveness overshadow these differences when a consideration of the town versus the villagers "Fufule", expressing an all-inclusive political, cultural and religious inferiority, a concept of the urban versus the rural. Yet, by tradition, the chieftaincy of Wa itself is based upon a system of rotation among four villages now very small in size.

I propose to view these conflicts counterbalanced by a social "esprit de corps" that is brought forth versus the villages through a study of the oral and religious traditions of the Wala. In this case, this cannot be limited to Wa alone but to a systematic contact with the Wala villages whose own considerations of the townspeople and of themselves would be expressed in their own local traditions.

A sociological and psychological evaluation of

the oral traditions of the Wala (primarily of Wa) - including their artistic and religious traditions - will add a greater perspective to an understanding of the values of this heterogeneous society whose social organization is based primarily on its religious and historical traditions.

Mona Fikry.