



Conflict, Faith and Coexistence: Exploring Religious Tensions between the Ahmadiyya Mission and Orthodox Muslims in Wa, Ghana

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Abstract

Religious intolerance remains a serious threat to peace and stability in pluralistic societies. In Wa, Ghana, the arrival of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Mission sparked tensions with Orthodox Muslims, exposing the fragility of interfaith coexistence despite the country's general avoidance of large-scale violence. Pockets of intolerance, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, underscore the vulnerability of interreligious relations in northern Ghana. This paper examines the historical and theological roots of tensions between Orthodox Muslims and the Ahmadiyya in Wa, their intersections with politics, education, and community leadership, and the mechanisms employed to manage or transform them. Using a qualitative research design and a comparative historical approach, data were gathered from fifteen (15) purposively selected participants, including Catholic and Protestant leaders, Orthodox and Ahmadiyya clerics, women's leaders, youth representatives, and lay members, complemented by archival materials and oral histories. Findings reveal that while overt confrontations have declined, mistrust persists, and local disputes are often reframed along sectarian lines. These dynamics illustrate how past conflicts continue to shape present interfaith relations. The study argues that understanding such tensions requires situating doctrinal disagreements within broader socio-political and historical contexts. The study further highlights dialogue, mediation, and peacebuilding initiatives as vital for sustaining coexistence in Wa and offers lessons for conflict transformation in comparable settings.

Keywords: Ahmadiyya, Orthodox Muslims, intra-religious conflict, religious tolerance, peacebuilding

Introduction

Religious intolerance continues to challenge peace and stability in pluralistic societies. In many contexts, intolerance has escalated into violent conflict and large-scale destruction. Northern Nigeria provides a striking example: the Boko Haram insurgency, which rejects all religious expressions outside its ideology, has caused thousands of deaths and immense property loss (Adesoji, 2010; Aghedo & Osumah, 2012). Such cases illustrate how exclusivism undermines cohesion and development.

Ghana, often celebrated for its relative interfaith harmony, has nonetheless experienced episodes of religious tension. Both inter-religious and intra-religious disputes have surfaced, particularly in northern Ghana, where Muslim sects compete for authority and legitimacy (Kuupiel & Nangwele, 2022; Tettey, 2023). Reports by the U.S. Department of State (2023) note that although generally localised, these tensions continue to shape Muslim communities, revealing the persistence of sectarian dynamics in Ghana's religious landscape.

In Wa, the capital of the Upper West Region, one of the earliest intra-Muslim conflicts followed the arrival of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Mission in 1934. The Wala, who had converted to Islam centuries earlier, practised predominantly Tijanniyya-oriented Orthodoxy. Orthodox Muslims refer to mainstream Sunni Muslims in West Africa who adhere to established Islamic legal and theological traditions, particularly the Mālikī school of law and Ash'arī theology, and who affirm the doctrine of the finality of the Prophet Muhammad's prophethood. Tijanniyya-oriented Orthodoxy specifies that this Sunni orthodoxy was expressed locally through affiliation with the Tijanniyya Sufi order, which shaped religious authority, ritual life, and communal identity (Trimingham,

1962; Weiss, 2008). The Ahmadi doctrine of continuing prophethood clashed sharply with Orthodox beliefs in the finality of Muhammad's mission, provoking hostility and long-term mistrust (Haron, 2018).

These disputes quickly extended beyond theology. Orthodox Muslims resisted Western-style education, while Ahmadis embraced it, building schools that advanced literacy and social mobility but also deepened resentment (Weiss, 2008; Wiafe, 2023). Political affiliations and struggles for community leadership further entrenched divisions, creating enduring social and political boundaries within Wa.

Yet Wa has also been a space of coexistence and negotiation. Despite doctrinal rivalries, everyday interactions reveal patterns of both tension and cooperation. Similar to findings in Nandom, where sectarian divisions are tempered by reconciliation efforts (Kuupiel & Nangwele, 2022), Wa demonstrates the complex interplay between conflict and coexistence. Examining these dynamics is therefore critical for understanding local religious life and for engaging broader debates on intra-religious conflict, tolerance, and peacebuilding in Africa.

The study integrates Hodkinson's (2023) framework of families, similarities, and multi-faith futures with Lederach's conflict transformation theory to guide both analysis and interpretation. Hodkinson's lens is used to identify overlapping identities, shared practices, and relational family resemblances among African Traditional Religion, Islam, and Christianity, explaining how coexistence persists in Wa despite doctrinal disagreement. Lederach's theory complements this by focusing on relationships, dialogue, and locally embedded mechanisms that transform tensions over time. Together, these lenses are consistently applied to the findings to interpret both the persistence of conflict and

the practices of negotiation and peacebuilding evident in Wa.

Against this background, the paper addresses key questions on: what are the historical and theological origins of the tensions between Orthodox Muslims and the Ahmadiyya in Wa, how these disputes have intersected with politics, education, and community leadership, and what mechanisms have been used to manage or transform the tensions and with what outcomes. In addressing these questions, the paper contributes to religious conflict and peacebuilding scholarship in two ways. Conceptually, it demonstrates that intra-religious conflicts often overlooked compared to inter-religious disputes, are embedded in wider socio-political and historical processes. Empirically, it shows how the Wa case illustrates the role of reformist movements, political alignments, and local peace efforts in shaping relations between Muslim groups. By situating doctrinal disagreements within their broader context, the study advances a nuanced understanding of how religion, identity, and conflict transformation intersect in contemporary Africa.

Literature review

Ahmadiyya Confrontation with Orthodox Muslims

Scholars on religion and conflict in Ghana have largely focused on inter-religious relations, particularly Christian–Muslim coexistence, often highlighting Ghana's reputation for tolerance (Gifford, 2016). Although this literature advances understanding of pluralism, it under-theorises intra-religious conflict, especially tensions among Muslim groups. Studies of Islam in Northern Ghana often isolate doctrinal or reformist differences, paying limited attention to how these intersect with education, politics, leadership, and everyday

life, leaving local dynamics of conflict management insufficiently explored.

The Ahmadiyya Muslim community holds the belief that prophethood has not ceased, and that their leader, Ghulam Ahmad, was a prophet. Throughout his life, Ghulam Ahmad engaged in disputations with mainstream Muslims regarding the finality of prophethood in Muhammad (Ali, 2019). Mainstream Islamic theology, however, affirms that God sent prophets to different peoples at different times, distinguishing between Nabi (prophet) and Rasul (messenger). Tradition maintains that 124,000 prophets were sent throughout history, with Adam as the first and Muhammad as the last. Muhammad is regarded as *Khatam an-Nabiyyin* (seal of the prophets), which signifies that no prophet will succeed him (Sulaiman, 2022).

This theological divergence between Ghulam Ahmad's claims and orthodox Muslim belief inevitably produced doctrinal conflict. In Ghana, the Tijaniyya and the Ahl al-Sunna saw themselves as defenders of the doctrine of Muhammad's finality and often responded to Ahmadi claims with physical and social confrontation (Abubakari, 2020). Ghulam Ahmad, nonetheless, introduced preaching of *non-violent jihad* as the principal strategy of Ahmadi propagation (Fisher, 2018).

Samwini (2006) notes that between 1921 and 1950, the Ahmadiyya presence was especially strong along Ghana's coastal Fante communities, before expanding through Adansi and Kumasi, and later to Wa and Dagbon. Within three decades, the mission had spread nationwide, provoking varied responses from Sunnis and Christians alike. Sunni clerics regarded Ahmadiyya as a heretical group usurping the authority of Islam, and tensions deepened whenever Ahmadi missionaries labelled orthodox Muslims *mushriqin* (associators). Conversely, Sunnis declared Ahmadis to be deviants who denied the Prophet

Muhammad's unique status as the seal of prophethood (Samwini, 2006).

These theological and social provocations were particularly fierce in Wa. Samwini (2006) documents that the Wala *ulama*, previously noted for their Suwarian tradition of tolerance, gradually shifted to more confrontational postures in response to Ahmadi activities. This shift contributed to violent confrontations between self-identified orthodox Muslims in Wa and Ahmadi converts, especially during the mid-20th century (Alhassan & Kuupiel, 2021).

Interactions between Ahmadis and the Tijaniyya also generated turbulence. Ahmadi missionaries, notably Maulvi Hakeem and other Pakistani clerics, adopted innovative methods such as the simultaneous use of the Qur'an and the Bible in public preaching. These polemics often targeted doctrines such as the Second Coming of Christ and the authenticity of the Bible, persuading some Christians to join the Ahmadiyya. By 1939, Ahmadi membership in Wa alone had risen to one hundred (excluding children), while by 1948, general membership in Ghana, including children, was estimated at 22,575 (Hanson, 1996).

For Muslims, however, the Ahmadi claim that Ghulam Ahmad was a prophet constituted an affront to the Qur'an's central message that Muhammad was the seal of the prophets. This assertion was perceived as undermining Islamic orthodoxy and led to persistent conflict, particularly in Northern Ghana (Saeed, 2020; Kuupiel & Nangwele, 2023).

Political factions in intra-Muslim tensions

Intra-Muslim tensions in Northern Ghana, particularly between the Ahmadiyya and Orthodox communities in Wa, originate in fundamental theological disputes, especially concerning the finality of prophethood and differences in ritual practice. Yet these doctrinal disagreements have been

significantly intensified by political alignments, transforming religious debate into broader struggles over power, legitimacy, and access to state resources. From the late colonial period through the post-independence era, religious distinctions among Tijaniyya, Wahhabi/Anbariya, and Ahmadiyya groups were frequently mobilised into political constituencies, particularly in urban centres such as Wa and Tamale. In these contexts, doctrinal rivalry became intertwined with electoral competition and patronage systems, reinforcing the mutual consolidation of religious and political identities (Dumbe, 2019; Mohammed et al., 2021).

Historical party alliances illustrate this politicisation. In Wa during the First Republic, the Orthodox Tijaniyya aligned with the Convention People's Party (CPP), while the Ahmadiyya supported the Northern People's Party (NPP). Comparable patterns emerged in Tamale, where Tijaniyya sympathised with the Progress Party (PP), and Wahhabi/Anbariya groups gravitated toward the National Alliance of Liberals (NAL). These alignments deepened communal cleavages and contributed to recurring tensions from the 1960s through the 1980s, as religious communities leveraged partisan ties to secure influence and material benefits (Bawa, 2019; Alhassan, 2021). Although overt conflict has diminished in recent decades, contemporary coexistence remains fragile. Scholars note that doctrinal disagreements and subtle political rivalries persist beneath the surface and may re-emerge during elections or elite competition (Wiafe, 2023; Issifu, 2022).

Research on the Dagbon chieftaincy conflict further demonstrates the intricate entanglement of religion, politics, and tradition in Northern Ghana, underscoring the inadequacy of purely theological explanations. Politicisation did not generate

intra-Muslim tensions but amplified existing doctrinal and organisational divisions, particularly when political actors sought religious endorsement, or communities instrumentalised partisan affiliations (Mohammed et al., 2021; Abideen, 2022).

Addressing these dynamics, the present study examines Orthodox–Ahmadiyya relations in Wa through an integrated theoretical lens. By combining Hodkinson’s “families” framework with Lederach’s conflict transformation theory, it situates sectarian tensions within broader historical and socio-political processes, highlighting how overlapping identities, shared spaces, and local peace mechanisms mediate both rivalry and coexistence.

Historical context

Islam and Christianity among the Wala

Christian missions in Wa faced significant obstacles. Christianity arrived late in Northern Ghana due to colonial policy; British administrators, wary of unrest, restricted missionary activity in Islamic strongholds, such as Wa. Consequently, the Roman Catholic Church only established a mission in Jirapa in the 1930s (McCoy, 1988). Conversion from Islam to Christianity was socially perilous, signifying a complete religious departure and risking ostracism. Therefore, both Orthodox and Ahmadi Muslims opposed Christian influence, particularly in education. In Catholic areas like Nandom, Ahmadi families withdrew children from mission schools, sending them instead to community-managed institutions to preserve religious identity (Weiss, 2008). Though marginal by the mid-20th century, Christianity later expanded via schools and healthcare (Gifford, 2016). This growth intersected with Wa’s existing Orthodox–Ahmadi rivalry, complicating its religious pluralism. Orthodox Muslims feared that Ahmadi receptivity to Western education and

non-Muslim collaboration could expose the community to Christian influence. Conversely, Ahmadis framed themselves as defenders of Islam against both Orthodox criticism and Christian advances, intensifying intra-Muslim tensions (Wiafe, 2023).

Therefore, Christianity in Wa must be analysed within a triangular Orthodox–Ahmadi–Christian framework. Its spread forced both Muslim groups to redefine their positions, demonstrating how interfaith encounters continually reshape intra-faith dynamics (Kuupiel & Nangwele, 2022; U.S. Department of State, 2023).

Arrival and Expansion of the Ahmadiyya in Wa

Islam was initially introduced to the Wala through Orthodox traditions, predominantly the Tijaniyya order, which shaped religious practice and authority in Wa for centuries. This relative religious stability was disrupted in the 1930s with the arrival of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Mission, an event that fundamentally altered Wa’s Islamic landscape and generated sustained intra-Muslim tensions. The spread of Ahmadiyya to Wa was closely linked to patterns of labour migration, particularly the seasonal movement of northern traders and farm workers to southern Ghana’s cocoa-growing regions. In the late 1920s, Wala migrants settled in the Adansi district of Ashanti, where exposure to Ahmadi missionaries facilitated new religious encounters. Among these migrants was Salih bin Hassan, a trader and Qur’anic teacher who later became the principal agent of Ahmadiyya’s introduction to Wa (Wilks, 1989; Salih, 2001).

The Ahmadiyya Movement, founded by Ghulam Ahmad (1835–1908) in Punjab, presented itself as a reformist current within Islam. Claiming to be both a mujaddid (renewer) and the promised Messiah and Mahdi, Ghulam Ahmad emphasised peaceful

propagation (tabligh) and reinterpreted jihad as spiritual struggle rather than armed conflict. Although regarded as heretical by many Muslim authorities, the movement expanded rapidly in former British colonies and established a strong base in Ghana, which became one of its major West African centres (Haron, 2018). The mission was formally introduced to the Gold Coast in 1921 by Abd al-Rahim Nayyar, following an invitation from Fante Muslims, with Saltpond emerging as its headquarters under Maulvi Fadl-ur-Rahman Hakeem (Daily Graphic, 2018).

Salih bin Hassan converted to Ahmadiyya in 1932 after engaging with preachers in Ashanti, becoming the pioneer of the movement in Wa despite some accounts naming Mumuni Koray as the first convert (Salih, 2001). His preaching provoked strong Orthodox opposition, leading to the expulsion of Ahmadi emissaries, petitions to colonial authorities, and Salih's repeated banishment for rejecting amulets and accepting a post-Muhammad prophet (Wilks, 1989; Weiss, 2008). The 1934 riots highlighted a deep communal rupture. Although a colonial inquiry reportedly followed, its records and published sources lack substantive findings. This limitation hinders the precise reconstruction of the inquiry's outcomes and immediate impact on Orthodox–Ahmadiyya relations.

Despite these early hostilities, the Ahmadiyya Mission endured and expanded. Its appeal to young Wala returnees from the South, combined with its strong emphasis on Western education and social mobility, distinguished it from Orthodox Islam and contributed to its lasting influence in Wa. Today, the Ahmadiyya community stands as a major religious presence, illustrating how reformist movements can survive opposition by linking doctrinal renewal to education,

mobility, and new forms of authority (Kuupiel & Nangwele, 2022).

Orthodox Islam and Makaranta Education

Islamic education among the Wala was initially shaped by the Limanyiri people under the leadership of Ya'Umaru, who introduced Qur'anic schools known as makaranta. As Islam spread and Wa's population grew, these schools multiplied and became central to religious instruction. The makaranta focused on Arabic literacy and Qur'anic recitation, relying heavily on rote memorisation. Pupils of varying ages were taught together, often reciting texts without deeper comprehension, a pedagogical approach described as "parrot fashion" (James, 1988). The curriculum was narrow and largely designed to produce mallams, though some teachers had limited mastery of Islamic principles, leading to the transmission of inaccurate teachings.

Despite these limitations, the makaranta played an important role in preserving religious knowledge and aspects of Wala history. Clerics trained in these schools maintained Arabic records, including genealogies and lists of Wa Limanns, which later informed historical scholarship (Wilks, 1989). As Fikry (1969) observed, Arabic literacy in Wa was primarily used for Qur'anic instruction and the recording of brief historical chronicles. Thus, while pedagogically limited, the makaranta contributed to cultural continuity and historical memory.

Over time, however, the makaranta system failed to adapt to the changing socio-economic realities of Wala society. Graduates often found few opportunities outside religious teaching, with some turning to divination, talisman production, or traditional medicine to sustain livelihoods (James, 1988). Orthodox Muslim resistance to

Western education further compounded these challenges. Western schools were widely viewed as secular and potentially Christianising, generating suspicion among Muslim parents. Colonial policies that occasionally compelled Muslim children to attend government schools intensified mistrust and alienation (Wilks, 1989; Weiss, 2008).

The long-term consequences of this educational conservatism were significant. While neighbouring groups such as the Dagaaba embraced Western education and gained social mobility, many Wala Muslims remained disadvantaged in colonial and postcolonial employment markets. Contemporary scholarship suggests that these historical patterns continue to shape disparities in education and socio-economic mobility among Muslim communities in Northern Ghana (Kuupiel & Nangwele, 2022; Tettey, 2023).

Education and leadership as Arenas of Rivalry

Education in Wa became a pivotal arena of religious contestation, shaping authority, identity formation, and access to socio-economic mobility. Orthodox Muslims traditionally prioritised the *makaranta* system, centred on Qur'anic instruction and Arabic literacy. While this model sustained religious continuity and communal cohesion, it provided limited preparation for engagement with colonial and postcolonial bureaucratic institutions. Suspicion toward Western-style schooling, often viewed as secular and associated with Christian missionary expansion, contributed to enduring educational and economic marginalisation among segments of the Wala Muslim community (Weiss, 2008).

By contrast, the Ahmadiyya Muslim Mission integrated Western-style education into its reformist programme from the 1930s onward. Establishing schools and teacher

training institutions in Wa and elsewhere in Ghana, the Ahmadiyya combined religious instruction with modern curricula and actively encouraged female education. This approach distinguished the movement from Orthodox Muslims and facilitated upward mobility, professional advancement, and institutional consolidation among its adherents. Ahmadi schools also provided an alternative for Muslim families hesitant to enrol children in Christian institutions, thereby strengthening Ahmadi influence within the local educational sphere (Haron, 2018; Kuupiel & Nangwele, 2022).

Christian missions, particularly the Roman Catholic Church, expanded into Wa later than in southern Ghana due to colonial policies that treated Northern Ghana as an Islamic sphere. Once established in centres such as Jirapa and Nandom, Catholic schools became significant pathways to higher education and public-sector employment. However, they also generated concern among Muslim communities wary of conversion. Consequently, some Muslim families withdrew their children, reinforcing sectarian boundaries in educational participation (McCoy, 1988; Wiafe, 2023). Education operated not merely as a pedagogical institution but as a strategic field through which religious communities negotiated modernity, influence, and social power (Bawa, 2019; Yussif, 2021).

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative, interpretive research design to examine how Ahmadiyya and Orthodox Muslims in Wa negotiate religious tension and coexistence. Emphasising participants' lived experiences, the analysis situated these accounts within broader historical and socio-religious contexts, combining interpretive inquiry with comparative historical analysis of archival sources and oral narratives to trace patterns

of continuity, divergence, and contestation in religious tolerance (Mbillah, 2020).

The study drew on qualitative data from fifteen (15) purposively selected participants with direct knowledge of religious life and conflict dynamics in Wa. These included Orthodox Muslim clerics, Ahmadiyya missionaries and leaders, an Ahlus Sunna representative, Catholic and Protestant clergy, women leaders, youth representatives, and lay community members. The diversity of participants ensured representation across religious affiliation, gender, age, and social roles. Clerics and religious leaders provided historical narratives and doctrinal perspectives, while women, youth, and lay participants contributed insights into everyday interactions, community tensions, and patterns of coexistence.

Data were collected through unstructured and semi-structured interviews conducted between October 2015 and October 2016, complemented by direct observation, archival materials, peace council records, and oral histories. Interview data were thematically analysed alongside documentary sources to identify convergences, divergences, and recurring patterns, ensuring that each participant's contribution informed the interpretation of both conflict and peacebuilding processes. The study's small sample size and focus on Wa limit broader generalisation, but the findings nonetheless offer valuable insights into intra-Muslim tensions and highlight the need for comparative research in other regions.

Table 1: Summary of the study participants

Participant Category	Number	Religious and Social Affiliation
Religious clerics (Orthodox)	3	Tijaniyya / Orthodox Islam
Religious leaders (Ahmadiyya)	3	Ahmadiyya Muslim Mission
Religious leader (Ahlus Sunna)	1	Ahlus Sunna wal-Jama'a
Christian clergy	2	Roman Catholic and Protestant churches
Women leaders	2	Muslim and Christian community leaders
Youth representatives	2	Muslim youth groups (Orthodox and Ahmadiyya)
Lay community members	2	Mixed religious background
Total	15	

The study addresses potential researcher bias in qualitative inquiry through reflexivity and methodological triangulation. Interview data were cross-checked against archival materials, oral histories, and secondary sources, with divergent perspectives deliberately preserved. Thematic analysis was conducted using iterative coding and cross-group comparison in NVivo, enabling systematic identification of patterns and differences, thereby enhancing analytical transparency, credibility, and interpretive rigour (Clarke, 2006).

Given the sensitive nature of religious tensions, the study adhered to rigorous ethical standards. Participation was entirely voluntary, informed consent was duly acquired, and measures to ensure anonymity and confidentiality were implemented through the application of pseudonyms and the exclusion of any identifying information. Interviews were conducted in environments preferred by the participants, with questions meticulously crafted to prevent the rekindling of unresolved grievances.

Results and Discussion

Religious Tension among the Dagaaba

Christianity was introduced to the Dagaaba in the late 1920s, when the Roman Catholic Church established its mission in Jirapa in 1929. Until then, the Dagaaba were predominantly adherents of African Traditional Religion (ATR), with Islam's influence remaining minimal until more recent decades. For several decades, the Roman Catholic Church remained the sole Christian denomination among the Dagaaba, coexisting peacefully with ATR. However, by the late 20th century, Protestant and Pentecostal churches had also established a presence in Jirapa. This diversification of Christian traditions, accompanied by different theological and doctrinal approaches, set the stage for new forms of religious contestation.

Interviews with Daniel Ayambillah, pastor of the AG Church, revealed a more complex reality (Ayambillah, interview, 2015). According to him, the act was carried out not by the congregation but by one individual, Richard Dery, a former AG member, who destroyed his family shrine, believing it to be the source of his misfortunes. Traditional belief holds that such shrines, often associated with dwarfs (kontome), wield spiritual powers that can bless or curse families (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2005). Although Dery claimed sole responsibility, the community held the AG Church collectively accountable, escalating the conflict.

Unlike the Roman Catholic Church, which had cultivated dialogue and accommodation with ATR in line with Vatican II and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (Kpiebaya, 1991; Catholic Diocese of Wa, 1999), Pentecostal churches adopted an exclusivist stance. While Catholics tolerated overlapping religious practices, Pentecostals rejected any dual allegiance to both Christianity and ATR. This theological

rigidity sharpened fault lines between the new churches and traditional authorities. Consequently, while Catholics were spared community reprisals, Pentecostal churches, including AG, Deeper Life, Seventh-Day Adventist, Presbyterian, and Methodist congregations, were banned from worship in Jirapa (Ghanaian Times, 2000, March 27). Muslims were also permitted to continue their activities, deepening suspicions among Pentecostals that Catholics were complicit in their marginalisation.

A Muslim woman leader interviewed in Wa reflected on the Jirapa crisis as a cautionary example of how religious rigidity escalates conflict. She noted that “peace here survives because people know when to hold their faith firmly and when to respect the community,” adding that everyday coexistence depends less on doctrine than on restraint and mutual recognition. In her view, conflicts intensify when religious groups refuse accommodation and ignore communal authority structures, reinforcing the lesson that tolerance is sustained through social relationships rather than theological dominance.

The crisis gained national attention. Reports in the Ghanaian Times and the Ghanaian Chronicle highlighted how civil servants, including the AG pastor and the district health director, fled Jirapa for safety (Ghanaian Chronicle, 2000, April 2). The Chronicle even ran the headline “Bloodshed Looms in IGP’s Backyard,” referencing the Inspector-General of Police, Peter Nanfuri, who hailed from Jirapa. Despite consultations with religious leaders, neither the state nor local traditional authorities were able to secure a lasting resolution. Community demands that the AG Church provide livestock to pacify the shrine underscored the persistence of ATR structures of authority (Nukunya, 2003; Gifford, 2004).

The conflict further exposed intra-Christian tensions. Pentecostals interpreted the

Catholic Church's silence and exemption from the ban as tacit betrayal, fueling an undercurrent of rivalry between the older Catholic establishment and the newer Pentecostal movements. Meanwhile, traditional leaders insisted that the destruction of the Naasala-tang shrine, a communal shrine regarded as an ancestral trust, was an unforgivable act requiring restitution. While individuals might renounce or destroy personal gods upon conversion, no individual was permitted to desecrate communal shrines (Meyer, 2015).

Ultimately, the 2000 Jirapa incident demonstrates how religious pluralism, when intersecting with competing theological orientations, can generate conflict. It reveals the fragile balance of coexistence between ATR and Christianity among the Dagaaba: while Catholicism pursued strategies of accommodation, Pentecostal exclusivism provoked confrontation. At the same time, the episode underscores how individual acts of religious zealotry, such as Richard Dery's destruction of the shrine, can implicate entire faith communities, with consequences extending beyond personal conviction to communal conflict and inter-church rivalry.

Religious Tension among the Wala

In Wa, Islam is represented by three major groups: the Orthodox community, the Ahmadiyya Movement, and Ahlus Sunna wal-Jama'a. To understand their historical development and relations, interviews were conducted on 21 October 2016 with leaders from each group at their respective meeting places.

The first interview was with Saiba, a cleric of the Orthodox tradition. He traced the origins of Islam in Wa to traders from present-day Mali who entered through Jirapa and settled in Limanyiri around the 14th century. Although this chronology appears historically ambitious, his account broadly aligns with scholarly works that emphasize

the role of long-distance trade and the imam's eventual integration at the Wa-Na's court (Levtzion, 2000; Sanneh, 2018). Saiba emphasized that Orthodox Muslims in Wa had generally maintained cordial relations with Christians, but he also noted that intra-Muslim divisions had sometimes intersected with politics. For example, the Orthodox community historically aligned with the Convention People's Party (CPP), while the Ahmadiyya community associated with the United Party (UP). Such alignments illustrate the problematic conflation of religious identity with political partisanship, a phenomenon that continues to shape Ghanaian public life (Amevenku, 2020).

The second interview was with Barshant-din Iddris, Ahmadiyya circuit missionary for Wa East. He recounted that the Ahmadiyya Movement was introduced to Wa in 1934 by Mallam Saliah, and that its early presence generated sharp conflict with Orthodox Muslims. Today, the Ahmadiyya have expanded beyond Wa into Kaleo, Sombo, Jirapa, and Nandom. Of particular note is their adoption of administrative terms such as "circuit," mirroring Methodist organisational structures, which may reflect the influence of Benjamin Sam, a Methodist catechist often (though inaccurately) associated with the introduction of Ahmadiyya to Ghana. While Ahmadi narratives highlight Sam's conversion as evidence of Christian embrace of Islam, recent scholarship shows that the movement's roots in Ghana lay instead with Fante Muslims who sought independence from Hausa and northern Muslim leadership (Samwini, 2021).

The third interview was conducted with Mauza Alhassan, regional imam of Ahlus Sunna wal-Jama'a at Wa Zongo. He reported that Ahlus Sunna was introduced to Wa on 17 October 1984 by Ibrahim Watara, who brought the movement from Accra. Like the Ahmadiyya, Ahlus Sunna spread to other

parts of the Upper West Region, including Lawra and Hamile.

These three groups, Orthodox, Ahmadiyya, and Ahlus Sunna, constitute the most visible Islamic communities in Wa. Historically, most conflicts have occurred not between Christians and Muslims, but rather between Orthodox Muslims and the Ahmadiyya. The arrival of the Ahmadiyya in 1934 generated long-standing religious contestations. Although relations between Christians and Muslims in Wa have remained largely peaceful in the 2000s, the historical tension between Ahmadiyya and Orthodox Muslims still lingers as an undercurrent, flaring up periodically with the least provocation. In some cases, non-religious disputes become framed as religious conflicts because of these persisting cleavages (Kobo, 2017; Sackey, 2020).

Unlike the Dagaaba context, where Pentecostalism's exclusivism created conflict with African Traditional Religion, the Wala religious landscape is defined by intra-Muslim contestation. Notably, in 2015, Wa witnessed an outbreak of tension between Orthodox and Ahmadiyya adherents, underscoring how historical grievances continue to shape present-day religious interactions.

Despite enduring theological differences, Orthodox and Ahmadiyya Muslims in Wa have negotiated shared spaces through everyday social interactions, including markets, neighbourhoods, schools, and family networks. Periods of relative peace have been sustained by shared ethnic identity, economic interdependence, and the mediation roles of traditional authorities and the Regional Peace Council. These factors, alongside dialogue initiatives and conflict reframing, have enabled coexistence by containing doctrinal disputes and preventing their escalation into sustained violence.

A Muslim youth representative from Wa described the tensions as most visible among

young people during moments of provocation but noted that everyday life often tempers hostility. He explained that “we argue about doctrine, but we still attend the same schools, play football together, and trade in the same markets.” According to him, youth mobilisation becomes dangerous only when political or religious leaders inflame grievances, whereas mediation by elders and the Peace Council often restrains escalation. This perspective highlights the central role of youth agency in both sustaining tension and maintaining coexistence

Issifu (2022) provides empirical support for the role of traditional authorities, mediation structures, and locally embedded peace mechanisms in containing religious and identity-based conflicts, directly reinforcing the claim about how periods of peace are sustained in Wa despite theological differences.

Tension Between Orthodox Muslims and Ahmadiis in Wa

The conflict between Orthodox Muslims and the Ahmadiyya Muslim Mission in Wa was centred on doctrinal dissension and competing demands for conformity that generated deep community divisions and ruptures within families. This reflects the general sociological observation that conflict occurs when “two parties belonging to the same organisation exchange behaviour that symbolizes opposition” (Alidu, 2024). Historically, the Ahmadiyya community in Wa emerged from within the Orthodox fold, transforming the religious landscape into two unequal but formidable rivals.

The introduction of Ahmadiyya teachings into Wa in 1932 by Hassan b. Salih, a Wala mallam and trader, intensified these tensions. Unlike in Southern Ghana, where Ahmadiyya's arrival caused limited disruption, in Northern Ghana and particularly in Wa, the movement provoked

significant upheaval (Ahmad, 2024). Oral traditions recorded in recent studies indicate that some Ahmadis believed their forefathers had foretold the coming of a reformist leader, although these same elders became the staunchest opponents of the movement (Ahmad, 2024).

Although open hostilities have waned, the rivalry continues to shape Wa society. Economically, both groups collaborated in commerce, while socially, their contest entrenched divisions in kinship networks. Orthodox critics described Ahmadi zeal as culturally disruptive, engendering transformations that remain contested across communities (Mahama, 2022). Studies also highlight the Ahmadiyya system of arbitration and conflict resolution as an internal mechanism that limited escalation of disputes (Nasir, 2022).

The continuing role of education as a site of competition aligns with earlier findings that Ahmadiyya investment in Western-style schooling has long functioned as a source of both social mobility and sectarian tension, while Orthodox Muslim ambivalence toward institutional control of education persists despite increased participation in formal schooling (Kuupiel & Nangwele, 2022; Wiafe, 2023).

Dondoli–Dzedzerayiri Tension: Mechanisms of Conflict Reframing and Containment

The 2015 Dondoli–Dzedzerayiri land dispute illustrates how latent intra-Muslim tensions in Wa are activated and reconfigured through non-religious grievances. Although the immediate trigger was a contest over land ownership, the dispute rapidly acquired a religious dimension because communal identities in the two suburbs align closely with sectarian affiliation: Dondoli is predominantly Orthodox, while Dzedzerayiri is largely Ahmadiyya. This alignment created a structural condition in which material

conflict became legible through religious categories, enabling grievances to be reframed along sectarian lines. The case demonstrates that religious tension in Wa often functions less as an originating cause of conflict than as an interpretive lens through which disputes are narrated, mobilised, and contested.

Evidence from the Regional Peace Council indicates that historical memory played a critical role in this reframing process. While both communities acknowledged shared ancestry and a long history of peaceful coexistence, Dzedzerayiri elders explicitly traced the breakdown of relations to the introduction of Ahmadiyya in 1934. This invocation of historical rupture served to moralise contemporary grievances, transforming a land dispute into a symbolic continuation of unresolved doctrinal and communal antagonisms. On the contrary, the Dondoli narrative emphasised immediate acts of violence, particularly the demolition of houses, framing the conflict as unjust aggression rather than sectarian retaliation. These competing narratives reveal how historical memory and selective attribution shape the escalation of local disputes.

At the same time, the case highlights the processes through which escalation was contained. Despite youth mobilisation and allegations of institutional bias by the police, elders in both communities exercised restraint. They actively sought mediation through recognised authorities, including the Wa-Naa and the Regional Peace Council. The effectiveness of this intervention lay not in resolving the substantive land dispute, which remained before the courts, but in depoliticising and de-religionising the conflict. By insisting that the issue be treated as a legal and administrative matter rather than a religious one, mediators disrupted the process of sectarian escalation. The presence of multiple religious representatives within

the Peace Council further reduced perceptions of bias and reinforced its legitimacy.

This episode also exposes the fragility of coexistence in contexts where demographic pressure, land scarcity, and youth unemployment intersect with entrenched religious identities. Population growth transformed farmland into residential space, intensifying competition over land and increasing the likelihood that disputes would emerge. However, the transformation of these disputes into religious conflicts was neither automatic nor inevitable. Rather, it depended on specific conditions: the alignment of territory with sectarian identity, the mobilisation of historical grievances, and the temporary breakdown of informal conflict-regulation mechanisms.

As outlined in the theoretical framework, Hodkinson's (2023) application of Wittgenstein's family resemblance concept explains how religious communities in Wa maintain overlapping commonalities without a singular defining feature. Interpreted through this lens, the Dondoli–Dzedzerayiri case demonstrates this dynamic, where shared lineage, ethnic bonds, and daily interactions typically foster harmonious relations. However, these commonalities exist alongside distinct doctrinal boundaries that become pronounced during tensions over leadership, resources, or status. The case thus illustrates how intra-religious conflict operates as a dynamic process, oscillating between cooperation and confrontation depending on how identities are mobilised and mediated.

The Wa experience contributes to comparative scholarship on intra-religious conflict by demonstrating that reformist movements such as the Ahmadiyya do not simply introduce theological division but reshape local power relations, historical narratives, and modes of belonging. The

findings reinforce the argument that religious conflict cannot be understood in isolation from socio-political contexts. By applying the combined lenses of family resemblance and conflict transformation, the analysis shows that sustainable coexistence in plural societies depends less on resolving doctrinal disagreement than on strengthening institutions and practices capable of reframing conflict, managing difference, and containing escalation.

Meeting with Islamic Scholars and Preachers in the Wa Municipality

The aim of the Regional Peace Council meeting with Islamic scholars and preachers in the Wa Municipality was three-fold. The first was to request continuous prayer from the scholars and preachers for peace in the Wa Municipality, and the second was to assist the Council to unearth the truth about the tension and finally, to prevent the tension from spreading and assuming a religious dimension. It was necessary to meet the preachers in the town because they preached on the various radio stations in the municipality, and if their sermons were not checked, they could lead to disaster. The various Muslim groups with their preachers loved to condemn the doctrine of the opposing denominations, which could lead to religious tension.

The Regional Peace Council admonished the preachers with regard to the need for preachers of the various Islamic units to be mindful of whatever they saw, heard or said. The preachers were entreated to have two ears to listen more, two eyes to see widely and one mouth to talk less. Islam is a religion of peace, and they were entreated to see each other as one and stop concentrating on the few differences among them. They were enjoined to foster and build on their similarities rather than their differences. This also applied to other religions, especially Christians, [and Muslims], who were to look

for the positives that bind them together than the negatives that separate them.

Consequently, the preachers agreed to have a lot to answer for on the Day of Judgement if they preached sermons that brought conflict. The need to search for the truth that will solve the current dispute was reiterated. In the above case, a land issue was turned into a religious conflict. People of Dondoli were seen as Orthodox Muslims, while those of Dzedzerayiri were seen as Ahmadis. In the same religion of Islam, there were differences in doctrine that made the Preachers to preach doctrine rather than their common enemies, such as poverty, disease, and illiteracy.

At the conclusion of the mediation process, a joint meeting was convened with youth leaders from Dzedzerayiri and Dondoli, resulting in a series of binding resolutions aimed at de-escalation. Both sides agreed that the dispute was fundamentally a land issue rather than a religious or political conflict and committed to refraining from its politicisation. They endorsed the continued engagement of the Regional Peace Council and recognised traditional leaders as central to the resolution process. The youth leaders further agreed to halt public statements, ensure an immediate ceasefire by withdrawing tools and mobilised youth, guarantee free movement across both communities, and sign a binding mediation agreement. This agreement was to be reviewed monthly to ensure sustained compliance and peace. The intervention was successful because it reframed the conflict away from sectarian identity toward shared interests, empowered local actors across leadership levels, and institutionalised follow-up, reflecting Lederach's emphasis on relationship-building, local ownership, and sustained processes rather than one-off settlements.

This mediation agreement, signed by the youth leaders of Dzedzerayiri and Dondoli,

brought the simmering religious conflict to an end. Though they were made to see it as a non-religious conflict, there were religious undercurrents in the whole conflict. The Dondoli community are Orthodox Muslims, while the Dzedzerayiri community are Ahmadis. Hassan b. Salih brought the Ahmadiyya Muslim Mission to Wa in the early 1930s, which brought religious tension between Orthodox Muslims and the Ahmadiyya Movement. The coming of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Mission to Wa brought tension to the town initially, but it has helped to maintain a religious balance in Wa. This tension often finds manifestation in interactions between the two sides, as was the case in the land dispute above. The Upper West Regional Peace Council did well to curtail the tension, which began as a land dispute.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study reveals that religious tensions in Wa transcend purely theological disagreements, embedded within historical legacies, political contestations, and socio-economic asymmetries that perpetuate mutual suspicion between Orthodox Muslims and the Ahmadiyya community. Doctrinal differences frequently become salient when refracted through competition over educational institutions, religious authority, and municipal political influence, thereby transforming mundane disputes into sectarian conflicts. Concurrently, Wa exhibits robust patterns of sustained coexistence, wherein mediation by the Regional Peace Council, alongside dense networks of quotidian social and economic exchange, functions to contain escalation and preserve intercommunal cooperation. Although the primary empirical data were collected during 2015–2016, subsequent informal consultations with community leaders suggest that large-scale violent confrontation has not resurfaced, despite enduring doctrinal divergence.

However, the absence of systematic longitudinal data beyond the original fieldwork precludes definitive assertions regarding the contemporary configuration of Ahmadiyya–Orthodox relations, necessitating updated empirical inquiry. Methodologically, while women were included in the sample, their perspectives remain insufficiently represented, warranting a more gender-sensitive analytical approach to illuminate how women uniquely experience and mediate sectarian tensions. Furthermore, the influence of social media and digital technologies upon religious discourse and mobilisation, along with comparative dynamics in other Ghanaian urban centres, remains underexplored, delineating critical trajectories for future research.

This study shows that religious tensions in Wa extend beyond doctrine, shaped by politics, education, and leadership. Using Hodgkinson's (2023) framework of families, similarities, and multi-faith futures and Lederach's conflict transformation theory, it highlights how overlapping identities and cultural ties enable both rivalry and cooperation, underscoring dialogue and shared values as vital for peacebuilding in plural societies.

Beyond the Wa context, the findings have broader implications for inter-religious coexistence and peacebuilding in multi-faith societies. They indicate that religious conflict is rarely resolved through doctrinal consensus but is more sustainably managed through inclusive governance, locally grounded mediation, and the protection of shared civic spaces. For policy-making, this underscores the need to support faith-based dialogue platforms, insulate religious leadership from partisan politics, and strengthen community-level peace infrastructures. The study affirms that plural societies sustain peace when religious

difference is acknowledged, managed, and embedded within wider social and political frameworks rather than suppressed.

To sustain peaceful coexistence in Wa and similar settings, the study recommends strengthening dialogue platforms under the Regional Peace Council, reframing conflicts beyond religious labels, promoting inclusive education, ensuring religious leaders' neutrality in politics, engaging youth through peace initiatives, leveraging faith-based mediation resources, and fostering research policy collaboration for continuous monitoring of inter- and intra-religious relations.

Competing interests

There is no known competing interest in this paper.

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