

Islam, Poverty and the Media Portrayal of the North-South Divide in Ghana

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Abstract

The unequal resource distribution in Ghana and its resultant different levels of development registered by the country's North and South have for a long time taken a religious coloration. Popular narrative amongst most ordinary citizens, some scholars and even decision makers attributes Ghana's northern poverty to Islam and southern prosperity to Christianity. The fallacious attributions not only deny the work that the different phases of the Ghanaian government have been doing since independence, but it also divides the country along religious lines by perpetuating stereotypes against Muslims. This paper seeks to correct the wrongly-founded societal and media perceptions by positing that, unfavorable climatic conditions and lack of resources are the primary causes of underdevelopment in the region. While the South's resource endowments in gold and cocoa have benefited its infrastructure development, it disfavors the poor North and results in continued North-South labor migration in search of employment and better living options. The role of mass media, therefore, is that of sending the right message.

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Introduction

The predominantly Muslim northern region of Ghana (hereinafter “Northern Ghana” or the “North”) is spatially the largest single region in the country covering 29.5% of the total surface area of the predominantly Christian West African nation formerly known the “Gold Coast”. The region comprises Northern Region, Upper East region and Upper West Region. According to figures from the 2010 national population census, the North hosts an average population of 4.2 million people.¹ This makes it the least populated area in the country having only 63.9 persons per square kilometer against the national average of 78.9 persons occupying the same area.² Ironically, despite the North being the largest in size, the region has low population density compared to other regions particularly the South. This situation is literally speculated upon the poor living conditions caused by unsuccessful agriculture, unemployment and generally fewer economic opportunities that consequently push even the remainder of the population to migrate to the South in search of opportunities.

Although much of the poverty situation ravaging Northern Ghana is not man-made due to the aforementioned reasons, the people of Ghana and those following the affairs of the gold-rich and the famous cocoa-producing African nation have been conditioned by mass media and personal communication passed down through generations to think and believe so. In particular, there exists an ingrained belief – especially amongst Ghanaian Southerners that northern poverty is connected to Islam since majority of northerners are Muslim. However, as it is discussed here-below, the only human contribution to the northern poverty has much to do with the colonial developmental policies which, in summary, favored the South and abandoned the North due to the former’s resource endowments and the latter’s resource scarcity. The colonial regional favoritism is not a surprise since the alien occupation aimed at nothing else than exploitation and profit making from the colonized populations and their resources.

This paper seeks to revisit the myths and realities related to poverty in Northern Ghana, its connection with Islam (if the connection exists at all), and the way mass media in the country have framed the agenda and the impact from such media framing and conditioning on the public. Partly, the impact being discussed here is the way Southerners think about the

¹ Ghana Statistical Services, *Population and Housing Census: Summary Report of Final Results* (Accra: Sako Press, 2012), 22.

²Ibid.

North and how the Northerners think about themselves in regard to poverty and developmental opportunities. This is partly the authors' reflection from the experience of bearing parenthood from the Northern and Southern Ghana respectively, coupled with the reactions being observed from each region. Put it more clearly, the author has experienced living in both regions and has seen and participated in the discourses this paper is trying to put into light. It is better to be noted that mass media have and continue to contribute to the peoples' superficial understanding of poverty in Ghana, especially the divide between 'the poor North' and 'the Rich South' as it is understood in the Ghanaian discourse, which weaknesses made Tuurosong and Kendie to conclude that media reportage of poverty in Northern Ghana falls short of "fulfilling the tenets of developmental journalism."³ As said earlier, attaching the North to both Islam and poverty started since and has been reinforced by colonialism as Wilks notes in the following text:

"The majority of these lay in what Levitzion usefully termed [“the Middle Volta Basin,”] of which the Protectorate of the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast (henceforth NTs) formed the largest part. Southern Ghanaians thought of this vast area of wooded grassland as the back of beyond, the epitome of remoteness.”⁴

So apart from the *Zongos* – Muslim strangers living in the South – the South knew less about the northern Muslims and hence thought of them as living in the end of the world.⁵

Within the media and social reinforcement that this work focuses on, the discussion features such crucial components as the way Ghana is viewed today in the world; the Islamic North and its demographics. The paper also surveys poverty situation in the region and the influence that media has had on stereotyping the region. In relation to the above, it also provides an account of what can be called the 'human contribution' to the poverty conditions in Northern Ghana and conclude with the work being done and its impact on media coverage regarding the problem of linking poverty to Islamic faith and ultimately to the North.

³Damasus Tuurosong and Stephen Kendie, "Redefining the Role of the Mass Media in Rural Development." *Journal of Asian Development Studies* Volume 3, Issue 1 (2014), 7.

⁴ Ivor Wilks, "Nehemia Levitzion and Islam in Ghana: Reminiscences." *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, Volume 42, No. 2/3. (2008), 253-254.

⁵ Ibid.

Ghana in the World Outlook

It seems to be the case that most outside observers considers contemporary Ghana as a relatively politically stable country. The transitions from the Presidents Jerry John Rawlings who belonged to the National Democratic Congress (NDC) political party to John Agyekum Kufuor who belonged to the New Patriotic Party (NPP) administration for example, has been hailed by many political analysts as a strong example of the possibility of a peaceful and democratic transition of power from one party to another. However, relative political stability has so far not yet led to an equitable economic ‘dividend’ between the country’s different regions. Economic development has been more uneven. Although the macro-economic development has been quite positive since the mid-1980s, its pay-offs have been unevenly distributed, a situation that has affected Northern Ghana negatively. Studies on the performance of the Ghanaian economy and the impact of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) that were commissioned by the World Bank and other international financial institutions during the late 1990s and early 2000s underlined the slow pace of economic improvement while noting the negative consequences of the reforms for some groups. Despite some upper level positive economic signs, including the annual growth of Ghana’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) during the 1990s and a relative reduction in poverty, the North has almost remained the same while positive changes were concentrated in the Greater Accra Region and the forest zone in Southern Ghana.⁶ It would then make sense to assert that the regions comparatively performing economically better are the ones being focused on than the ones with poor economic performance; that misinformed mass media would capitalize on the differences to the extent of blaming the victim for the ensuing poverty.

In both absolute and in relative terms, poverty is still the grim reality of the majority of the Ghanaian population. Even worse, the socio-economic division between the *well off* and the *worse off* is not only the problem of individuals but also institutional. In Ghana, as in many other African states, socio-economic inequality is also a regional factor, closely linked with the ‘North-South’ divide of the country, with some parts being less developed, more

⁶Luc Christiaensen, Lionel Demery, and Stefano Paternostro, *Growth, Distribution, and Poverty in Africa. Messages from the 1990s*, Washington DC: The World Bank 2002; Ernest Y Kunfaa, Tony Dogbe, Heather J. MacKay and Celia Marshall, “Ghana ‘Empty Pockets,’” in: Deepa Narayan and Patti Petesch, eds. *Voices of the Poor from Many Lands*. Washington, DC/New York: The World Bank/Oxford University Press 2002; Mick Foster and Douglas Zormelo, *How, When and Why Does Poverty Get Budget Priority? Poverty Reduction Strategy and Public Expenditure in Ghana*, Overseas Development Institute Working Paper 164, London: Overseas Development Institute, April 2002.

marginalized and, thus, easily stigmatized as the ‘backward’ part of that country – say Ghana⁷ - the end of the world if you like.

Why Ghana’s North is Muslim?

There are different accounts as to when Islam entered Ghana, but Albert Adu Boahen narrates that the existing Kingdoms of the time maintain a positive attitude towards Muslim strangers.⁸ While Dovlo and Asante allege that Islam is said to have entered Ghana around the 8th Century Common Era,⁹ others say the religion made its way into Ghana mainly through the Northern part particularly during the 15th Century. However, the differing explanations are generally leveled down by an umbrella explanation which posits that the spread of Islam in West Africa around the 7th and 8th Centuries Common Era is speculated upon the trading activities across the Sahara desert, in which traders from the North were coming to the South for commercial activities.¹⁰

Traders and scholars from Mande or Wangara ethnic group carried the religion into the area. Some local scholars believe that Islam reached Ghana through *daawa*¹¹ workers who came from the neighboring African countries. They observe that many of Ghana’s daawa workers received their Islamic education in mosques; they add that the mosque in Ghana was playing a prominent role in the lives of Muslims. According to Sheikh Hassan Khalid, a prominent Ghanaian Islamic Daawa activist, Islam reached Ghana through Daawa activists who visited the country from the neighboring African countries such as Burkina Faso and Ivory Coast, whose sole aim was to spread Islam to their neighbors.¹²

⁷ As noted in Harold Coulombe *The Pattern of Poverty in Ghana 1988-1992*, Indiana University, Ghana Statistical Services, 1995; UNDP *Ghana Human Development Report 2000*.

⁸ Albert Adu-Boahen, J. F Ade Ajayi and Michael Tidy, *Topics in West African History: School Edition*, (London: Longman, 1989), 9.

⁹ Elmo Dovlo & Alfred Asante, “Reinterpreting the Straight Path: Ghanaian Muslim Converts in Mission to Muslims.” *Exchange*, Volume 32. No. 3, (2003), 215.

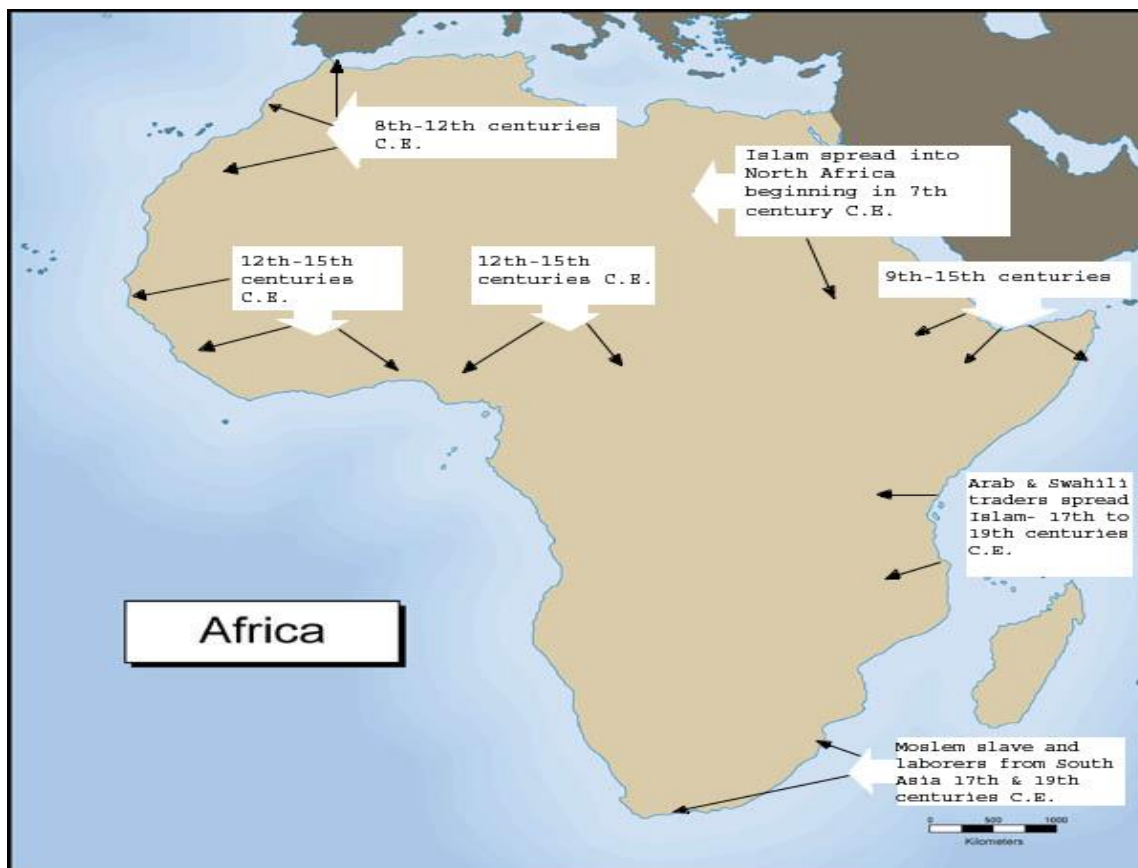
¹⁰ Ioan Lewis, “Islamic Frontiers in Africa and Asia: Africa South of the Sahara.” In Schacht, Joseph and C. E. Bosworth. 1979. *The Legacy of Islam*. London: Thetford: Oxford University Press, 108.

¹¹ The proselytizing or preaching of Islam.

¹² Hashim Ali Mahdi, “A Journey Through Islam: Muslims have come up well in Ghana,” Accessed June 30th, 2014.

<http://www.arabnews.com/islam-perspective/journey-through-islam-muslims-have-come-well-ghana>

Map: The Spread of Islam in West Africa



Source: Unknown

Media and Social Reinforcement

Socially, attaching Islam to poverty is partly caused by the strong religious attachment most African communities put into everyday life.¹³ Although there exists mutual causality between societal beliefs and media agenda in the sense that agenda comes from a section of the society and is then molded by the media to affect the society itself as McCombs and Shaw surmise in their study of political campaigns and media impact on voters' choice "... the political world is reproduced imperfectly by individual news media. Yet [...] that voters tend to share the media's *composite* definition of what is important strongly suggests an agenda-

¹³ Jelana Pokimica, Isaac Addai, and Baffour Takyi, "Religion and Subjective Well-Being in Ghana." *Social Indicators Research*, No. 106, (2012), 62.

setting function of mass media”¹⁴, no correlation has been scientifically proven between religion and poverty thus far. Put it more clearly, mass media taps from social experience in interpreting the state of affairs, say poverty in Northern Ghana, prioritizes the segments of the message it wants the society to absorb most and exert this ‘way of seeing’ into the society to influence public opinion. In relation to Ghana, for a long time Southern media which happen to be the dominant ones have also been setting the agenda and framing the issues along the North-South divide although over time and more education the reporting sometimes assumes some balance by attributing the North’s poverty natural causes than to Islam. The agenda being set is simply presented as ‘the North is Muslim so it is poor and the South Christian so it is rich. Overtime, this belief becomes deeply cultivated into the minds of the people, and ordinary discourse manifest in people’s everyday talks. This has been the case in present day Ghana, except for a few educated people who look at the problem of Northern poverty more objectively without attaching the Islamic religious aspect to it.

To correct this distorted image, some effort has been going on in both Northern and Southern Ghana which includes the founding of media outlets such as *Voice of Islam, Ghana TV* and other media outlets whose messages and editorial approach seek to level the situation down by presenting the problem more objectively and in what can be said to be from the ‘victim’s’ perspective. Such outlets also include the national media known as the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation (GBC), and have had impact on the social perceptions of northern poverty at a relatively slow pace.

The ensuing discourse suggests that the Northern Regions of Ghana are poor and some northerners who migrate to the South live in *Zongos*¹⁵ where they face the same problems of their poverty being attributed to their being Muslim. It sounds rather illogical, however, to conclude that all Northerners are poor, although a large number of them live in conditions of apathy. The continued negative media portrayal and hence inculcation of the idea that the North is ‘backward’ perpetuates the *subalternization* of the region. Due to the North being relatively weak compared to the South, it is not surprising that even its own and other media

¹⁴Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, “The Agenda-setting Function of Mass Media.” *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 36 No 2.(1972), 184.

¹⁵Zongo is a heterogeneous community with a unique cultural practice, completely different from any community and ethnic group in Ghana. Those who stay in Zongos – the *Zongorians* – are bounded together by Islam not ethnicity

efforts to correct the distorted image on reporting about northern poverty become unpopular amongst the majority of people who happen to believe the opposite.

It would be intellectually challenging to surmise the ensuing discourse regarding Northern Ghana's poverty and its misconstrued linkages to Islam as *Islamophobia* – to mean hate or fear for Islam. Although the country's population is statistically majority Christian and that there exists such negative portrayal of Islam, there has never been any significant confrontation between these two religious groups. Muslims in Ghana are literally being associated with poverty, and the Southerners' fear or hate over the religion (if any) has not been measured and has literally not done any known significant harm apart from sheer negative stereotyping of the people from the North. The peaceful co-existence is even proven by the instances of religious intermarriages between Christians and Muslims, although this is to a lesser extent. The implicit impact on developmental policy making and implementation is however obvious as the paper has argued and demonstrated the developmental inequities that have crumbled the Northern region in welfare terms of infrastructure, food shortages and general standards of living. That being said, arriving at the conclusion that Ghanaian Christians are phobic of Islam is as equally wrong as media influencing public by holding that Islam is linked to poverty.

Northern Ghana's Demographics and Poverty Outlook

The three northern regions of Ghana are persistently the poorest regions of the country; the stable economic growth that Ghana has experienced since the early 1990s has not extended to the North. While parts of other regions are also poor, the North comprises the poorest large geographical area, one where economic growth has been difficult to stimulate without significantly linking it to the South. There are several reasons and benefits favoring the bridging the North-South divide through economic growth. Ghana's overall economic growth and ability to reduce poverty will be substantially enhanced if northern Ghana shares the country's growth rate. As a trading economy, Ghana's global position will progress further if northern Ghana also grows economically by empowering it to produce exports as well as which would increase its purchasing power to consume the essential goods and services. Arguably, every citizen has a right to share a country's prosperity; but countries' political stability can also be threatened by regional under-development, as it has been observed at least in northern Uganda where decades of uprising are linked to its being economically neglected.

Despite the alarming poverty levels and the media distortion of the true reality of the region's poverty situation and its causes, Northerners actively participate in the political affairs of the country. The country's current president John Mahama, for example, comes from the Upper West region and the past vice President, the late Alhaji Aliu Mohammed, was from the Northern Region. On this note, critics allege that amongst the problems that keep dragging the North back into endless poverty includes self-abandonment of the region by people who happen to excel into higher government positions, the private sector and the business world; they would rather relocate to the South and establish businesses there than go back and help develop the North.

The most recent census report hold that Ghana has a Christian population of approximately 71.2 percent while the population of Muslims stands at around 17 percent. It is better to note here that Christian population has been significantly increasing year after another while the Muslim population has been growing at a slower pace. For example, in the year 2000 the ratio was 68.8 percent Christian against 15.9 Muslim populations. The percentages rose to 71.2 Christian and 17.6 Muslim in 2010 – an increase attributed to general population increase.¹⁶The figures have since long been disputed by Muslims alleging that their number has continually been underreported; Muslims themselves claim to number between 30 and 45 percent of the entire population of Ghana.¹⁷Yet, this under-reporting of the actual number of Ghanaian Muslims could be one area that implicates not only government institutions but also the media industry.

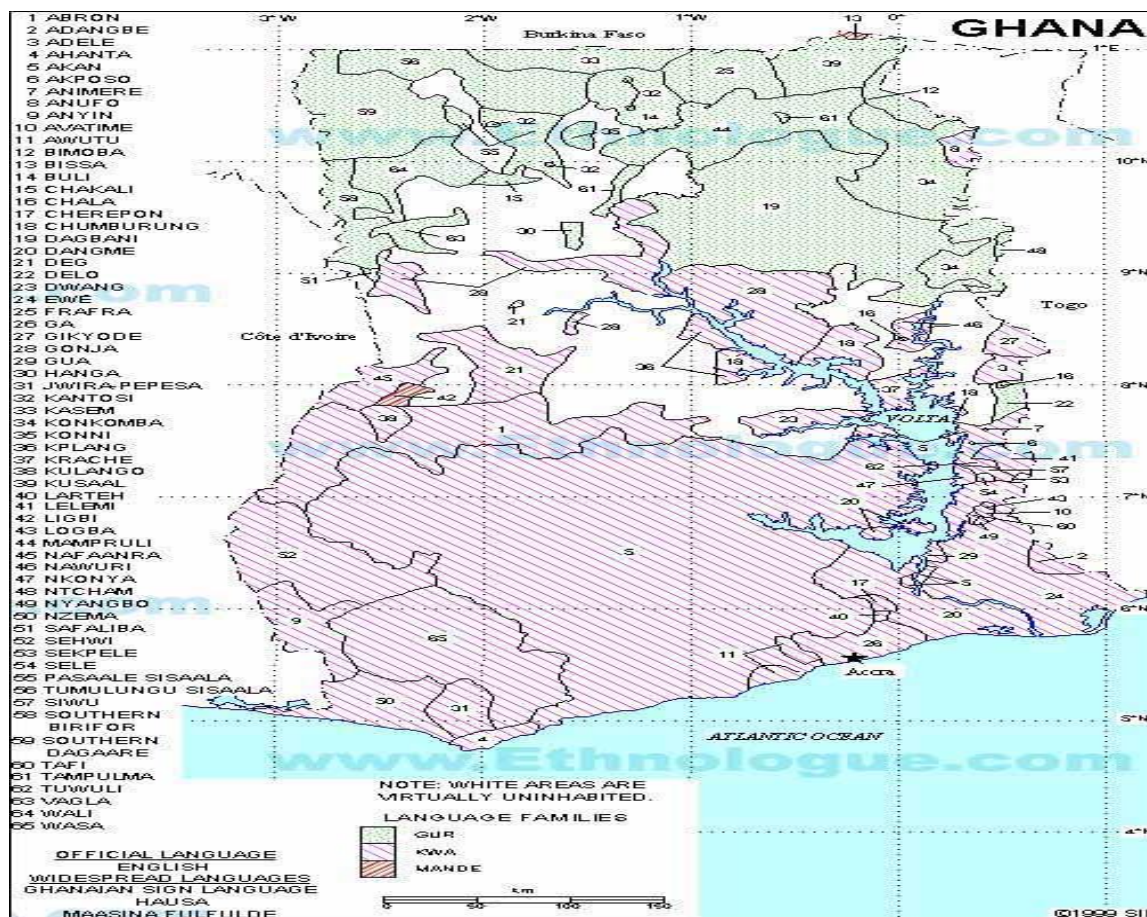
For the sake of the North-South comparison, looking at population distribution of the most prominent regions becomes unavoidable. Generally, the South is more populated than the North, and this could somehow narrowly substantiate the statistical under-reporting of the Muslim population that dominates the North. Put it more clearly, Southern Ghana is more populated, is predominantly Christian and developed compared to the three Northern regions. The North, on the other hand, is predominantly Muslim, less populated and underdeveloped. Just as it is the case with the unexplored relationship between Islam and poverty, the relationship between population density and development particularly in regard to Ghana's North-South divide, proves an important endeavor for scholars to undertake. Breaking the

¹⁶Ghana Statistical Services, *Population and Housing Census*, 6.

¹⁷ Elmo Dovlo & Alfred Asante, "Reinterpreting the Straight Path: Ghanaian Muslim Converts in Mission to Muslims." *Exchange*, Volume 32. No. 3, (2003), 216.

population factor further down, as of the year 2008 George Owusu informs us that the nation's capital, Accra, hosted about 16.3 percent of the entire population while the Ashanti region hosted 19.4 percent of the entire population.¹⁸

Map: Ethnicity and Population Distribution in North



Source: George Owusu, 2008. Poverty outlook

Due to northern poverty being almost obvious as the media has touted over time, it is not uncommon for scholars including Pokimica, Addai and Takyito open their narratives with such assertive statements as the following:

“Poverty levels in the Upper and Northern regions are rather high compared to those in the Southern regions. The North is also largely populated by Muslim communities, though some

¹⁸ George Owusu, “Small Towns in Ghana: Justifications for their Promotion under Ghana's Decentralisation Programme.” *African Studies Quarterly*, Volume 8. No. 2, (2008), 51.

of them live in the South, but there, they tend to be found in some of the poorest parts of Ghana's urban areas."¹⁹

To prove the rampancy of the northern poverty discourse in Ghana, more recently the Rural Poverty Portal plainly reiterated the same account as saying: "Poverty rates in the north are two to three times the national average, and chronic food insecurity remains a critical challenge there."²⁰

The two quotations above point to the problems such as acute food insecurity and urban poverty amongst Northerners; but there is a loose mention of Islam that does not necessarily link it to the appalling conditions there.

Although this paper does not intend to delve into poverty in its depth, defining what the concept means becomes pertinent in our attempts to understand its nuances. In order for the definitions to work, there is the need to bridge the gap between academia and real life experiences of the poor. For instance, Bradshaw realized that poverty in general sense means the lack of necessities including food, shelter, medical care and safety.²¹ Other scholars including Chambers,²² Todaro and Smith have defined it to include lack of, or limited access to assets and other conditions of life.²³ Over time, this gap has become narrower since from what can be referred to as academic, development practitioners and policy maker's point of view, the definition of poverty is not entirely different from the perspective of poor people. The lack of opportunities captured within these definitions at both individual satisfaction and community welfare at large are well manifested in the social dynamics in Northern Ghana.

The reasons why Northern Ghana is poor compared to its Southern counterpart are mostly natural causes as the paper has mentioned above. For example, the South is endowed

¹⁹Pokimica, Addai and Takyi, "Religion and Subjective Well-Being in Ghana", 76.

²⁰ Rural Poverty Portal, "Rural Poverty in Ghana." *Rural Poverty Portal*. Accessed, Saturday, November 30, 2013.
<http://www.ruralpovertyportal.org/country/home/tags/ghana>

²¹Ted K. Bradshaw, "Theories of Poverty and Antipoverty Programs in Community," *Community Development* Volume 38 Issue 1, (2007), 9.

²² Robert Chambers, *Whose Reality Counts? Putting the First Last*, (London: Intermediate Technology, 1997), 163.

²³ Michael Todaro and Stephen Smith, *Economic Development* 10th ed. (London: Pearson Education Limited, 2009), 222.

with two stable rainy seasons, which allow for successful farming while the North remains dry with only one unpredictable rainy season. Moreover, while for centuries the South has been famous for its large gold deposits and extensive cocoa production, the North has nothing to compare. Therefore, while there is more investment, employment opportunities and the incentives to improve the service sector, these opportunities barely exist in the North. At this juncture people would perhaps want to remind themselves the question “where does the link between Islam and poverty that mass media capitalize upon come from?”

Colonial Treatment of the North

Another explanation for Northern poverty was the treatment of the region during colonial period. Due to the North being predominantly Muslim, favoring the Muslim North would have been contrary to the ‘evangelizing mission that colonialism envisioned to bring to Africa’.²⁴ The policy of *indifference* had then been applied throughout.²⁵ In short, the North was socially neglected but remained economically exploited through supplying labor to the South to work in gold mines and cocoa plantations.

Through the famous colonial policy of ‘*regional differentiation*’, the British successfully marginalized Northern Ghana during the entire time of colonial occupation, and reviving it after independence up until today has never been an easy task. The British had turned the region into a labor reserve while the South was the production area. Thus North became official labor supplier and the South a *de facto* producer.²⁶ This intensified the North-South divide as infrastructure and social services were geared more toward the South than the North.

As an effect of such colonial policy, Northern Ghana remains backward until today compared to the South with labor migration still continuing although in a different way. While the British used to coerce people to go provide labor in the South, the present-day labor migration can be said to be largely voluntary in the sense that the youth usually move to the South in search of better economic opportunities, which do not exist in the North.

²⁴Holger Weiss, “Variations in British colonial Attitudes towards Islam and Muslims in Northern Ghana: Ca. 1900-1930,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* Vol. 25, Issue 1, (2005), 73.

²⁵Ibid. 74.

²⁶, Nii-K. Plange, “The Colonial State in Northern Ghana: The Political Economy of Pacification.” *Review of African Political Economy*, No. 31, Capital vs. Labour in West Africa.(1984), 29-30, 34.

Conclusions: The Work Being Done

Having noticed both the reality about poverty and the distorted media portrayal of the problem, several mechanisms have been placed in order to help alleviate poverty in the Northern region or to bridge the gap between the North and the Southern parts of Ghana. Successive governments since independence have implemented variety of anti- poverty social protection programs, although the results have not been quite visible. For example, there have been programs to provide free education for all since the time of the first President Kwame Nkrumah – a tradition that continues until today in the Northern regions. Apart from the developmental programs, Nkrumah also supported scholarship on the country's Muslim communities for policy makers to get a better insight of the culture and contextualize the development efforts to fit the peoples' needs.²⁷ The government also continues to provide free health services on select needy populations such as in the areas of maternal health, and pediatric and elderly healthcare services.

Infrastructure is yet another area that different government phases have been focusing on, but yet the situation calls for more seriousness in implementing the policies and plans. Poor road and air transport links between Northern and Southern Ghana and between Northern Ghana and neighboring countries such as Burkina Faso and Ivory Coast discourage inter-regional trade and capital mobility.²⁸ From a north-south perspective, the need is to link different parts of the north with different parts of the south; and improving inter-region transport links within both north and south more generally would undoubtedly have beneficial effects for the economy as a whole. Indeed, there has been little new transport infrastructure since the 1960s: this is surely an area where massive public investment under-written by aid could be beneficial to balanced regional economic growth.

Overall, the Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategy (GPRS) explicitly focuses attention on the regions where the incidence of poverty is high and promises to increase investment in feeder roads in the three northern regions. However, GPRS investments in road transport in the Northern regions are geared towards the construction and maintenance of feeder roads in order to enhance access to urban markets, clinics, hospitals and schools. Feeder road

²⁷ Ivor Wilks, "Nehemia Levitzion and Islam in Ghana: Reminiscences." *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, Volume 42, No. 2/3, (2008), 257.

²⁸ Joseph A. Yaro and Jan Hesselberg, "The Contours of Poverty in Northern Ghana: Policy Implications for Combating Food Insecurity." *Research Review NS* Volume 26, No. 2, (2010), 89-90, 104.

investment appears to be highly favored by donors because it can be targeted to poor rural areas where beneficiaries can be identified. It also tends to be very popular with both road agencies and rural communities. However, relative to incomes in the rural parts of northern Ghana, feeder road construction can be an extremely expensive intervention and there is little guarantee this endeavor can stimulate development without complimentary measures. More generally, there is the need for the government and other stakeholders to embark on some more sustainable approaches to bringing development to the area. Such endeavors would focus on long-term investment, which would require better infrastructure and social services and which would consequently result in employment creation. These deliberate measures to uplift the living standards and general welfare of the people of Northern Ghana in regard to trade, infrastructure development, health and most importantly food security would, in the long run, clear the existing negative stereotyping of Islam and its being associated with poverty. It would also cultivate a greater sense of media responsibility toward the reporting of the poverty situation in Northern Ghana.

