

Muslim Community in Ghana: The Contemporary Scene

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Abstract

Umumnya artikel ini membicarakan masyarakat Islam di Ghana masa kini. Perbincangan ditumpukan bagaimana Islam berkembang di negara Afrika ini melalui pengimarahannya institusi masjid dan penubuhan badan-badan keagamaan di samping bantuan-bantuan atau sokongan material negara-negara Islam bagi membangunkan masyarakat Islam di negara ini. Artikel ini juga mengemukakan beberapa permasalahan yang dihadapi oleh masyarakat Islam Ghana terutama tentang pendidikan Islam secara formal; institusi perkaduan dan badan induk yang mewakili umat Islam serta ketiadaan institusi Baitulmal secara formal di samping berhadapan dengan keadaan masyarakatnya yang agak konflik.

Introduction

The socio-economic activities of Muslims in Ghana currently spell the dawn of a new era. Gone are the days when Muslim organisations were feudal in outlook. The cold war between Muslim factions during the sixties and seventies has subsided giving way to a healthy co-operation among Muslims. More than ever before Muslim organisations are engaged in philanthropic activities in the interest of mankind as the teachings of Islam would have it. A GBC Television news item of April 16, 1994 indicated that the Ghana Government is seriously considering a bill in parliament to declare the two *Ids*¹ as public holidays because Ghana has a sizeable Muslim population. This piece of information shows the extent to which Islam in Ghana has come of age. From the small groups of Muslim traders who came from Mali and Hausaland to settle in isolated communities in the northern and upper parts of the country during the latter part of the sixteenth century, Islam has grown to become one of the three main religions professed by the people of Ghana alongside Christianity and African Traditional Religion.

The introduction of Islam in what is now known as Modern Ghana has been dealt with at some length by competent writers like Mervyn Hiskett, Peter Clarke, Adu Boahen, Ivor Wilks, J. Spencer Trimingham to name only a few. The penetration of Islam into specific districts such as the Gonja, Dagomba, Wa and Ashante has also received the attention of historians. In one of the works of Ivor Wilks for example we see the beginnings of Islam in the Gonja districts through the agencies of Faqih Ismail and Muhammad al Abyad in 1585.² Peter Clarke also suggests that Islam probably entered Dagomba some-

times during the 17th. century but it was not until 1700 that it began to exercise any real influence.³ Ivor Wilks in another work refers to a source which says, "Muhammad al-Kashnawi introduced Zanjina, King of Daghbon to Islam. He named him Muhammad Zanjina. Yamusa Saghyardu al-Wangari was made imam of the mosque".⁴

Na Zanjina is reported to have reigned from 1700 - 1714 and is also said to be the first king to become Muslim so that the suggested date of 1700 as the beginning of Islam in Dagbon seems plausible.

Mevyn Hiskett records that the Ashanti kingdom was created by southern Akans in the late 17th. century and expanded to incorporate many Muslim communities within its jurisdiction by the middle of the 18th. century. Contacts with these northern neighbours formally introduced Islam into Ashanti. Hiskett specifically mentions Osei Kwandwo who ruled Ashanti from 1764 to 1777 as having initiated administrative reforms in which he employed Muslim literates as officials.⁵ Abu Bakr Kyeame is mentioned as having been appointed by Osei Kwandwo in an official capacity.⁶ Ivor Wilks however is of the opinion that despite the truth of what Hiskett says, Islam did not get firmly established in the metropolitan regions of Ashanti until the reign of Osei Kwame who came to the throne in 1777.⁷ Many writers mention the head of the Muslim community in Kumasi by 1807 as Muhammad al Ghamba⁸ who established a school in which about seventy pupils were taught Arabic.⁹ Indeed Kumasi has seen many colourful leaders well versed in the Islamic Tradition. Mallam Mutawakil, Mallam Sallau and Alfa Dan Tano of blessed memory are household names in Kumasi. For a more up to date information about the state of Muslims in Kumasi we have to look elsewhere for information. This is ably provided by Adelaide Opoku Nontwiri in an unpublished undergraduate thesis completed in 1992 captioned:

"Islam in a contemporary Ghanaian Society: A case study of Kumasi".

There are in Ghana today large concentrations of Muslims in many parts of the country which have not yet been accounted for in any writing. The history of Islam in such places therefore remains in the form of oral tradition handed down from generation to generation. It is my considered view that the history of Islam in Ghana is incomplete without the accounts of Islam in those places. Wenchi in the Brong Ahafo region for example has a Muslim community of old standing which dates back to the time of Samori.¹⁰ Agona Swedru also has a growing Muslim community dating back over a hundred years.¹¹ There are many such places in both the Central and Western regions of the country which have evaded written recognition. With this state of affairs in mind the Department of Religious Studies, University of Cape Coast has initiated a series of studies at the undergraduate level in an attempt to cover such areas.

It is on record that after the first conquest of the Muslims in North Africa their religion advanced southwards into the continent not by armies but by schools and books; and mosques; by trade and inter-marriages.¹² This is very true as it is borne out by the facts of experience and it is amazing to see how mosques are being constructed in the country these days. Alhaji Misbah, Chairman, Ghana Mission of the Revival of Islamic Heritage Society confirmed to me in an interview in his home at Kasoa that his outfit has constructed sixty mosques in many parts of the country within two years and hopes to do more before the year 2000. Inshallah Muslims are now establishing schools which are in conformity with modern requirements. Typical examples are the Education complex at Wenchi,

Ambariya Islamic Institute in Tamale and Adab Islamic Preparatory School at Nima. Islamic books are now being made available to institutions and individuals alike by the Centre for Distribution of Islamic Books (Accra). The Islamic Council for Development and Humanitarian Services (Accra) has established an orphanage caring for more than 300 orphans and has sunk more than seventy-five wells in various parts of the country since 1988. More than ever before the Islamic faith is being translated into practice.

The office of National Chief Imam seems to be very stable at the moment. The current National Chief Imam is Sheikh Uthman Sharubutu. He is the son of Alhaji Nuhu Sharubutu who died in 1982, son of Officer Dan Borno the first African officer of the Gold Coast Constabulary who died in 1900 and is buried at Sampa in the Brong Ahafo region. Sheikh Uthman is thus the twelfth person to hold that highest office in Accra since 1850.¹³

The office of Chief Imam is not hereditary but based on learning, seniority and piety. It is therefore possible for the son of an Imam to be appointed to the office by the elders of the community. With this notion in mind Mallam Jadal the 9th. Imam was the son of Malam Abubakr the 2nd. Imam. Mallam Bako the 5th. Imam was the son of Malam Naino the first Imam. Alhaji Mukhtari Abbas the 11th. Imam is the son of Alhaji Muhammad Abbas the 7th. Imam. In all cases the appointment was based not on the hereditary principle but on the basis of learning and piety. The term of some of the Imams had been brief ranging from 2 to 6 years. On the list Malam Naino has the longest term of office from 1850-1896. This is followed by Muhammad Bako whose term span 1903-1938.

Mallam Fulata Borno served for only two years from 1901-1902 while the two previous Imams shared five years. After Mallam Bako's death in 1938 the Office of Chief Imam passed on to Mallam Abdulah briefly; then Alhaji Muhammadu Abbas took over and continued until shortly after Independence in 1957. When Imam Abbas was relieved of his post, Alhaji Futa led the prayers as the Chief Imam but sometime in 1958 Mallam Jadal came in very briefly. 1960 brought Alhaji Nuhu who led the Friday prayers until the fall of the old regime of Dr Kwame Nkrumah in February 1966.

On the current Islamic situation in the country Madam Hajia Katumi, a beneficiary of western education and the leader of the Muslim Ladies Association of Ghana, expressed the need for Muslim women to come out of their shell and contribute more effectively to the development of the nation. Her advice to Muslim women of Ghana is that they should forget the age old notion that the woman's place is only in the kitchen. In a G.B.C. Television programme, *Aqeedah*, she reminded Muslim women of the great deeds of Muslim women of old and made reference to some Muslim women intellectuals in other parts of the Muslim world.

Gone are the days when Muslim parents feared that the acquisition of western education relieved the Muslim child of his or her faith in Islam. More and more Muslim parents are sending their wards to the public schools for adequate education. Alhaji Mukhtari Abbas, the former National Chief Imam of Ghana, believed Muslim children should be sent to the public schools for the type of education which would enable them to compare favourably with their Christian counterparts. Alhaji Malik Abdul Mumin, a person long associated with Muslim organisations in the country intimated that as the need for western education in our society becomes more and more imperative Muslims should not fail to pursue western education if they are to play their role as useful citizens of the society.¹⁴ It is in line with this way of thinking, that the Council of Muslim Chiefs and

Imams met at Sukura Central Mosque, Accra, from 4th. to 6th. March 1989 adopted a resolution on education which says:

*“We, the Imams and Muslim Chiefs in Ghana do hereby endorse the establishment of the Islamic Education Unit by the Ministry of Education and commend the government for the efforts it is making towards reforms in general on the subject of education in Ghana today. We call on all muslim Chiefs and Islamic Educationists to accept and help the formation of the Islamic Education Unit in their areas and participate fully in the works of these units in order to bring the traditional Makaranta system up to the standards required to be able to face and accept fully the challenges and advantages of the present educational system obtainable in the country. There should therefore be the need for constant interaction between the people and members of the Education Units in order to get a situation where both secular and Islamic education are equally emphasised to the advantage of Muslim children”.*¹⁵

This in itself is a recognition that secular education for Muslim children at present is imperative. It is strange though that since this declaration there has not been any appreciable change in the *Makaranta* system. Most of the *Makaranta* are still operating along the same traditional lines - purely Arabic learning in the form of Quranic reading classes.

I spoke to some of the proprietors of these schools about the concept of the Islamic Education Unit. Some of them were skeptical about the whole idea. Asked why they are not equally emphasizing secular programmes they complained that the Ministry has not supplied them with the teachers for that purpose. The Ministry's reservations spring from the fact that many of the *Makaranta*'s lack adequate facilities to merit favourable consideration.

The Shia Connection

A fascinating aspect of Islam in Ghana today is the introduction of Shia Islam in the wake of the Iranian Revolution which brought Imam Ayatollah Khomeini into power in Iran in 1979. Since then the Iranians have made their presence felt by some activities which deserve recommendation. The celebration annually of “*Quds Day*” was introduced into the country by the Iranians - an occasion on which they spend large sums of money to see the celebration through. This celebration though not sanctioned by the Shariah is harmless. The Iranians also sponsor individual Ghanaian Muslims for the Hajj each year. In the year 1988 the Iranians supplied 698 pieces of poly mats to cover the Abossey Okai Central Mosque and also sponsored the installation of the lighting system of the mosque and provided large quantities of books for the mosque library. In a conversation with Alhaji Malik on the performance of the Iranians he was full of praise for them but regretted that all the books supplied for the library have disappeared.¹⁶ The Iranians have also offered scholarships to Ghanaians to study in Iranian universities. The Iranian mission in Ghana has also given help to individual Ghanaians in many useful ways - completing and furnishing a house for one and re-roofing a house for another - to name only few. Perhaps the most prominent of the activities of the Iranians in the country is the establishment of two modern clinics in Accra to which many Ghanaians are beneficiaries. The Iranians have also established a school at Amama in Cape Coast.

In the field of agriculture, the Iranians have the Agricultural and Rural Develop-

ment Project (ARD) based in the Northern Region. It also has a pilot programme at Kasoa in the Central Region. All these are done to translate faith into action. The Shia have some prominent Ghanaian Muslims as sympathizers but actual conversion to Shi'ism is yet to be seen. This is evidenced by the fact that even though they have constructed a mosque at Mamobi in Accra (The Rasul-ul-Ikram Mosque) patronage is next to nothing. In 1994 the Iranians contributed to the celebration of the Farmers Day to the tune of three hundred and ten thousand cedis (₵310,000.00). The Iranian Cultural Centre in Accra also publishes and distributes a magazine in English called *Al-Kauthar* which contains interesting articles on Islam and the Iranian Revolution. If only all friendly Muslim countries would do the same it would be good for Ghana.

In the global debate on Family Planning and Population Explosion, Ghanaian Muslims have not been found wanting. For the first time in the history of Islam in Ghana a Muslim Family Counselling Service has been set up. It is the latest Muslim NGO to appear on the scene. It has various sub-divisions and is headed by Alhaji Baba Issah. The service has now about 50 fieldworkers in the regions engaged in advising Muslim families on how to space their children for a more effective upbringing.

Islamic Propagation in Ghana

Islamic propagation in Ghana has been for a very long time a matter of individual effort. If we take into consideration the case of Faqih Ismail and his son Muhamamd al-Abyad who introduced Islam to the people of the Gonja we realise that they were individuals working on their own to propagate the faith.¹⁷ The case of Dagbon was no difference because Muhammad al-Kashnawi who introduced Na Zanjina to Islam in 1700 was also an individual.¹⁸ Mallam Naino, who came from Katsina in Nigeria to settle in Accra in 1850 and set in motion the Friday Congregational Prayer was also an individual.¹⁹ Mallam Ahmad Daafi who established Swedru Zongo towards the close of the 19th. century was also an individual.²⁰ Organized missionary work such as we see among Christians and Ahmadis in the country is comparatively recent. Yet Ghana has had many able preachers from the earliest times to the present who have actually worked to propagate the faith. Sheikh Umar of Keta Krachie spread Islamic learning in the country from the 1870s until his death in 1934. His products are among the most respected Alims in the country today.

Preachers of the Islamic faith in the country fall into two broad categories. The first group consists of men who preach with a view to reform or refine the lives of Muslims. In this category may be mentioned Sheikh Umar of Keta Krachie who died in 1934, Alfa Alhasan of Salaga who died in 1934, Mallam Mutawakilu of Kumasi, (d. 1966) Mallam Abu Bakr Molla, (Mallam Mai Bulala), Mallam Idris al-Waiz of Nsawam, Mallam Muhammed Bello, Sheikh Baba Al Waiz of Kumasi and Mallam Suraqatu of Nima to name only a few. The second group consists of those men who preach in order to attract non Muslims into the faith. In this group may be mentioned Mallam Abu Bakr Siddiq of Saltpond/Anomabu who is credited with the conversion of Benjamin Sam the first Fanti Muslim in 1880. Through this man many Fantis embraced Islam [In fact the History of Islam in Fanteland may be conveniently traced to the conversion of Benjamin Sam]. Others are, Mallam Naino (d. in 1896) Imam Muhammed Abbas (d. in 1973) Mallam Ali Ankrah (d. in 1976). Through the preaching of Ali Ankrah many Gas embraced Islam.

Then in the 1930s in Accra, Sheikh Mallam Musa, (d. in 1984) began his preaching career which resulted in many more inhabitants of the south embracing Islam. Among the youth we may cite the case of Ashitey Larbie²¹ who embraced Islam in 1948 and preached to many in Accra and its surrounding villages which brought as many as 500 heathens to the Islamic fold.

The Islamic Call Society of Libya has promoted the course of Islam in Ghana in recent years by providing Islamic literature to many institutions. It also organizes camps for new converts and encourages them with gifts. The Society also has a number of preachers on its pay roll. The Saudi Arabian Government also has some preachers on its pay roll to propagate the faith.

Muslim and non-Muslim Relations in Ghana

The relation between Muslims and other faiths in the country may be described as cordial. During state functions, both Muslim and Christian clergymen are asked by the state to offer prayers to the Almighty. Except for some isolated instances of confrontation between some Muslims and Christian groups all is well and should be allowed to stay that way.

At the moment many Ghanaians put on dresses which in the olden days were used only by Muslims. Christians now wear Agbada Batakari and Danshiki freely without any sense of guilt. They take it to be a harmless culture and it seems that it is only in time that such people will realise that Islam is a harmless religion that can be practiced by any one who is seeking for a religion of fulfilment.

Problems facing Muslims in Ghana

As a secretary to the Legon Muslim Students Society in 1967 I received several representations from some Muslim quarters about the problems facing Muslims in Ghana with a request to find out what could be done about the situation. Some of the problems are no longer tenable and need not be discussed here. It is perhaps enough to mention that the absence of copies of Quran in mosques which used to be a problem has now been largely solved by the Saudi Arabian Government through the provision of several thousands of the Arabic Quran for free distribution. The Libyan Call Society has also provided several copies for free distribution to both individuals and schools.

A problem which has been consistently stressed is the problem facing Islamic schools in the country. Most of these Islamic schools are very poorly run by individuals or organisations with limited facilities for modern Islamic education. A large number of these schools are yet to provide competent classroom environment for their educands. The children are over crowded in poorly constructed wooden structures attached to mosques or dwelling houses. Recreational facilities are lacking; toilet facilities are also non-existent. What is worse the teachers are ill equipped and ill-paid with the result that the teachers are unable to give their best. The syllabus for the Islamic schools is not uniform as each proprietor depends on his own efforts to procure books for use in their schools. With the teachers unable to give their best, the level of education the Muslim child acquires is bound to be low and poor.

Unlike in Nigeria where products of Islamic schools gain employment as Qadis and secretaries at the Shariah Courts their Ghanaian counterparts are not that fortunate and have to earn a living through other means which is not always healthy. In short the problems facing Islamic education in the country may be listed as follows:

- I) absence of adequate physical structures
- II) lack of good classroom and school environment
- III) lack of uniform or agreed syllabus
- IV) lack of motivation for the teachers
- V) low level of Islamic education
- VI) Difficulty with incorporating secular subjects into the Islamic education system
- VII) over-crowding in the Islamic schools

To counter some of these problems it has been suggested that a number of schools in one community should be merged. As for example two Islamic schools in a single community which run on a three classroom system should come together to form one school with six classrooms. In this case it should be possible to run a complete basic education programme ranging from Primary 1 to Primary 6. They may maintain their present locations so that a pupil having passed from P1 to P3 in one location transfers to the other to complete P4 to P6. Such a situation though not without some difficulties should be taken as the best of all possible alternatives given the present circumstances. The time table should be such that it makes room for secular subjects so that after the six year period a Muslim child can enrol in any government sponsored secondary school. Qualified teachers should also be employed and motivated to teach at the appropriate levels. The merger suggested earlier may be taken as a temporary measure and as soon as a more convenient site is available school should be recited. Expert advice should be sought on how best to run the school rather than leaving it to chance. Islamic education if properly run would produce people who will be use ful citizens of society. The teacher in the Islamic school therefore needs all the encouragements that society can offer. The teacher in the Islamic school is expected to teach the children “the ways of the sages and morals of the refined; and be to the physician who does not apply a remedy until he knows the disease”.²² The teacher is expected to improve himself first so that he may set a good example for the learners.

The problems facing Muslim community in Ghana in general ranges from an effective central Islamic organ that will command the allegiance of all Muslims or at best a majority of them, to a huge army of destitutes, popularly called beggars, to deal with. The question of numerous Muslims beggars roaming the streets of Accra or in the vicinities of mosques and markets, car parks is not an easy matter. It requires the collective efforts of all concerned Muslims with the help of a central organ or possibly the government of the day.

The absence of an Islamic Treasury (Baitul-Mal) into which donations could be paid and distributed to the poor and needy is also a big issue which ought to be tackled. Suggestions are made from time to time by some concerned Muslims but it does not take off. This is chiefly due to suspicion on the part of many Muslims that somebody wants to use the ideato collect money and “chop it”.

As regards a central Islamic organ that can be influential with the State on matters of religion and welfare of Muslims, such organs seem to exist but when a small group tries to hijack its activities the system collapses and we are back where we started. The National Council of Ulema and Imams formed in 1983, if given the necessary support and recognition would serve that purpose since it embraces the Chief Imams and scholars of all the regions of Ghana. The situation with that organ as at present is unfortunately anything but healthy.

There is also the problem of explaining Islam to the people so that its teachings can be understood. Much of the differences that arise between Muslim groups is chiefly due to misunderstanding of the teachings of Islam. The recent differences at Wenchi is a case in point. One group says it is unIslamic to pray in a mosque with a minaret. Now to cut the long story short this is not enable because the mosque in Makka has eight minarets and that is the seat of Islam. Differences arise out of ignorance. The situation calls for a journal or magazine in which Islam is explained in simple terms. Islamic scholars should be invited to contribute articles on Islam based on the teachings of the faith as seen through the Quran and the Hadith. Islam as J.O. Hunwick rightly sees it "... is not only a religion - that is a system of beliefs regarding the supernatural and man's relation to it in theory and in practice. It has also seen itself as a complete way of life, regulating all man's political, social and even economic activities".²³ Hunwick also quotes P.M. Holt who describes the all embracing nature of Islam as "a complex cultural synthesis, centred in a distinctive faith and necessarily set in the framework of a continuing political life".²⁴ This brings home the idea that Islam is a living faith and ought to be constantly explained and this makes the need for a journal or newspaper imperative.

The problems facing Muslims in this country are many but not peculiar to Ghana. In other words the problems are not insurmountable. We may recall here that when the Muslims first came to Madinah they were faced with many problems but with the collective efforts of both Ansar and Muhajirun under the able leadership of the Prophet (Sallallahu Alayhi Wa Sallam) they were able to secure a solemn treaty which made for a peaceful co-existence and also built a mosque for public worship.²⁵ Muslims in this country therefore should not be disheartened but work steadfastly in the right direction.

A noisy scene greeted me when I walked into one of the alleys of Nima in Accra some time ago but on my immediate left was a sign board which reads - NIMA EAST YOUTH ASSOCIATION. Yes, this is one of the many Muslim organisations which came into being in the country during the 1980s. Some exist only in name but some are doing well to keep the flame of Islam aloft. The aims and objectives of some of the organisations are laudable. As for example the *Al-Haqq* Society which was formed in 1993 in Kumasi has the following aims and objectives:

1. Help promote and disseminate the true teachings of Islam.
2. Combat false notions and ideas spread by non-Muslim groups.
3. Organise social activities for Muslims to enhance their overall participation in national life.
4. Organise lectures, symposia and public preachings.
5. Bring out Islamic publications.
6. The society will liaise and co-operate with other Muslim organisations to achieve such goals.

These are really laudable aims and if realised would greatly promote the cause of Islam and lead to peaceful co-existence with members of other faiths and within the Muslim Umma. The aims are really the aims of the Muslim community in Ghana.

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- 24 *Ibid.*
- 25 M.A. Rahim, *Muhammad in Prophecy and in Fact*, Ashraft Publications, Karachi, 1975, p. 31.