

Interview with Ghana's National Chief Imam: Alhaji Shaykh Usman Sharubutu

Location of Interview: Fadame (Accra)

Persons present: Dr. Mark Sey (Department of Religious Studies at the University of Cape Coast), Muhammad Modibo Saied (Gbenono Electoral Area candidate), Alhaji Alhassan Abu (Secretary to the National Chief Imam), and Mallam Moro Abbas (a National Chief Imam confidant),

Date of Interview: 16 July 2006.

Languages in which Interview conducted: Questions were presented in English, translated into Hausa by Dr. Sey; National Chief Imam responded in Hausa and translated into English by Dr. Sey.

Opening station: Good evening Sir. My name is David Owusu-Ansah, and I am Professor of History at James Madison University in America. In the past The last 25 years, I have been doing research on Islam [in Ghana]. My first work [on Islam in Ghana] was on Asante-Muslim/Islam relations in the 19th century. Since then, I have taken interest in Islamic education (Quranic education and the Makaranta or recitation schools), and now, I want to see how the modern system of formal education is influencing the [traditional] Quranic/Makaranta system of learning.

Response: Yes, the integration of English and formalism into the Islamic education system is profitable.

Research statement continued: Last year, I started a different project on Muslim and their peaceful relationship with the large [Ghanaian] community-of Christian relations and of relations with non-Christians.

Response: Yes, our relationship is cordial.

Interview statement: Last year, I talked to Alhajji Umar of the Ahl-Sunnah al-Jama` and he told me that if ever talk to you, I should know that he was very pleased with how you both related when you went to Mecca.

Response: Yes, we do work together, [but note] that every Muslim is an ahl-Sunnah [people who follow the tradition of the Prophet Mohammad] so the term [they have applied to themselves] is a misnomer.

Question: [In the past years, I have talked to a lot of people before we scheduled this interview with you] so I come to you wanting to know and to understand] the position of the National Chief Imam. Who becomes the chief Imam, How is the chief Imam made, and can you tell me a little about the structure?

Response: He [The National Chief Imam] is the pivot [main leader of the Ghana Muslim community], then he has deputy by the name of Alhajji Kamal al-Din of Nima. He deputizes for him whenever he [the National Chief Imam] goes away.

Question: How about the Imams in Kumase and Imams of other areas?

Response: All the regions have their Chief Imams, and I am the National Chief Imam. So they are all in the system. If there is any problem in the Muslim community in a particular area, the Asante Imam [for example] will deal with it. But if the Asante Imam desires the services of the national level, then he [the National Chief Imam] will enter it. All the Imams when they come to Accra will come to see [the National Chief Imam].

Question: Is the person who becomes the [National] chief Imam only selected from among the Accra [national capital] Imams?

Response: It is a consensus position from all the Imams that he should be the National Chief Imam.

Question: Can therefore be consensus that the person who becomes National Chief Imam come from Sekondi-Takoradi for example?

Response: At first, he was Imam of Accra, but now he is recognized as National Chief Imam and all the Imams agreed to this and nobody disagrees with it. He did not elect himself. He was elected by consensus.

Question: [I asked the question] because when you go around doing interviews, and they [the Muslims I have interviewed] will say that we are fine with Christians, and we are fine with others, but the only trouble we have [as Muslims] is among ourselves. You see therefore that these are some of the issues about which you can have lack of consensus. So I raise this question because I want to see how by consensus Muslim [in Ghana] solve things peacefully.

Response: Over here there is no conflict. That is we do not have inter-religious conflicts.

Question: Why is that the case [that we do not have religious conflicts that get out of hand in Ghana]?

Response: The situation is brought about because [he the Chief Imam] is a peace loving man. He [the chief Imam prefers] to consult with others about peace. [As National chief Imam] I believe in consultation with others. During consultation if there is anything that leads to conflict we try to deal with it immediately so peace can prevail.

Question: So [does] the Council of Imams [the one that Mustafa is a member] helps with this?

Response: No! That is an NGO (a Non-governmental organization). But in consultation with the Chief Imams of the regions, we address a number of issues. For example, this year we will meet at Wa [capital of the Upper West Region] to discuss when to begin the Ramadan fasting. Another year too we will go to another region for our meetings. We have been to Tamale [capital of the Northern Region]. This time [this year our meeting is to be held] at the Upper West Region at Wa. And once we decide [on when to begin the fast] it applies to all Muslims.

Question: I suppose that these issues [on when to start the fast] were one of the topics on which Muslims disagreed in the past?

Response: This is a new development. Before the Ramadan, we meet and on consensus agree when to start. The Holy Quran says that “you sight the moon, start, if you don’t sight the moon wait.” They do not want to monopolize everything in Accra, so each year they assemble at one of the regions and when the moon is sighted then they begin the fast.

Question: Let me ask another question. Ahmadiyya Muslim! Are they part of the consultation [to start the fast] or are they perceived and treated like Christians and there consulted only in large topics of religious relations?

Response: Yes when it comes to the annual Ramadan fast, they [the Ahmadiyya] are part of our consultations.

Question: One more question and I will ask another personal question, so I have two more questions: The Islamic Education Unit...I know from my conversations across the country that there is the need to address the issue of Arabic instruction and examination by the National Exams Council but up till now it has not been done. I remember that two years ago when the President addressed Muslims at a function, the National Chief Imam raised the issue and the President promised to do something about it but it has not been done. So, has this issue been brought up again and what pressures are being applied to get it resolved?

Response: The issue is on-going. There is the issue also of the syllabus for Arabic instruction at the Senior Secondary School (SSS). In the past, they had a National Arabic examination, but now it is becoming a West African system and we need to develop the syllabus to meet those needs.

Question: I know that to be the National Chief Imam, one must be very educated and knowledgeable [in matters of Islamic scholarship]. Can you please give a rough idea how you started your learning/education when you were a child all the way up?

Response: I studied with my father and mother (parents); I learned to recite the Quran and to write Arabic. Then I was sent to Kumase to study under Alhajji Awudu Dan-Tano, the foremost Arabic Grammarian who was the mentor of the Alims (scholars) of Kumase. He taught me. And from there I went to study under Shaykh Ibrahim Nyass of Kaolack of Senegal. Shaykh Kaolack, as he was popularly called, taught me the mystical dimensions of knowledge. Shaykh Kaolack was from Senegal and he belongs to the Tijanni brotherhood. [I mentioned to the National Chief Imam that the current Tijanni leader of Senegal, Shaykh Hassan Cisse was my classmate in graduate school]. From Senegal, I learned the mystical dimension and one should know that mysticism is about the purification of the self. It teaches patience, humility, sincerity, and not looking down on people. So if you have so much learning and you have envy in you, then that is not good. It is this mysticism that purges your heart from all these negative tendencies of the self. This cleanliness [mysticism] makes the spirit strong. All those who have purified hearts are strong, and it was God who provided it for the people of Mecca and the people of Medina. That is [purified] heart was what the Prophet Mohammad had and he said “If

something happens to you it has happened to me and I don't want anything bad to happen to me" which means that nothing bad should happen to you! This is the same rule that we should love our brothers as much as we love ourselves. So Shaykh Kaolack taught this and he brought this mysticism to us. As for book knowledge, people who have book knowledge and lack spiritual knowledge are limited. The goal of [effective learning] is to have both [book and spiritual knowledge] so that you can be cleansed of all negative tendencies. Mysticism is therefore about inner knowledge.

Statement: I will like to thank him for the time granted me and ask for permission to end the interview.

Response: Yes!