

Interview with Alhaji Asoma Banda

Interview conducted by Emmanuel Akyeampong (Harvard University) with David Owusu-Ansah (James Madison University) as part of the Islam and Tolerance Project

Interview Date 26 July 2006

Location of Interview: Accra-Ghana in the Office of Antrak Company.

Opening statement by Dr. Akyeampong: Today is 26 July 2006. We are at the office of Alhaji Asoma Banda, CEO of Antrak Company. We are here to talk generally and more broadly about his life, about his faith, and about his work. His title, Alhaji [indicates that] he is a Muslim and a prominent one, who also built for the faith one of the important Mosques in Accra [Ghana] located at the Airport Residential Area. Alhaji, let's start by you telling us a little bit about your life so we can create a biographical profile. I know you have told me some in an informal way but this one will be a voice file that someone can [visit] and decide that he or she is more interested in your life than my interest in your Mosque and they will then use your life [story] to teach.

Response: Yes, I was born in 1933 in Kintampo [in Ghana]. Both my parents were Muslims so I was brought up a Muslim and I am still a Muslim. It is a faith that I believe in and it doesn't give us any reason to hate the Christian. The only people we do not want to associate ourselves with are those who worship idols and have something in place of God. According to our own [Islamic] religion, even our Prophet [Muhammad] (May God's Peace Be on Him) was chased out of Mecca by people who worshiped idols. The place where we go now to pray as a sacred Mosque [the Kabba in Mecca] used to be filled with people who worshiping idols and the Prophet was about forty years old before he was ordained as a Prophet. If you look at his life, he was chased out of there to Medina; and later when he went to Jerusalem, there were no Mosques there for him to pray at so he prayed at a Church. This is one of the reasons why the Israelis and the Palestinians are fighting claiming their ownership of Jerusalem. So, in so far as we are concerned or how we were taught, there is no friction between us and the Christians. The only difference is that we [Muslims] say that the Prophet Muhammad is the last of the [long line of] prophets and we believe in Christ. Christ came and he told his followers that "I am going but after I am gone there will be a prophet who will come." So they asked him, "how can we identify this person who is to come?" He said, "He will wash his hands, he will wash his feet, and his face." This is the ablution that we [Muslims] do. So in our religion we believe this. We also do not believe that Christ was crucified. They tried to crucify him but God saved him. Somebody from his disciples came out looking like him, and that person was crucified in place of Christ. So these are the differences between us and the Christians. When they say that politics are within the religions, I do not believe or accept that. In this part of our world [in Ghana], the politics is rather bringing us [all the people of the various religious groups] together. [For example], if you want to become president or go [be elected] to Parliament, you need the votes of both Christians and Muslims. So for that reason, you have to be a friend of all these people. In that sense, there is no political friction between Muslims and Christians in Ghana. In West Africa, it was only in Nigeria that sometime ago that some people started having this friction. But it was individuals who are doing this. We [Muslims] were not taught about [this in our religion]. We were taught

to convince Christians to convert them and not to fight them. Most of my friends are Christians and we get along very well because they don't stop me from worshiping God in my way, and I don't stop them [from worshiping God in their way]. In fact, sometimes I follow people [I know] to Churches when they get married at Church and my friend (Rev Dr. Otobil of the Central Gospel Church in Accra) I know him very personally. I know Buckle (of the Accra Catholic Church) so this is something that I believe that there is no [religious] friction [in Ghana]. So I think that in Ghana here, the religious leaders work together. Before, even our Muslims (the Ahmadis) used not to get along. But today we work to get along. The National Chief Imam and the Imam of the Ahmadis they work together. So I don't think that in this part of the world we have friction. What is happening in the Middle East is not about the religion. There is something more than the religion. I think that the conflict in the Middle East is caused by Oil. There is a power that wants to control [the resources] and some people don't want it. So I think it is economic war than religious war

Question/Statement by Dr. Akyeampong: [Will this] be like ethnicity or tribal conflict in which those seeking support turn to religion?

Response: That is right. If you look at it, even in the United States, one of the best friends of the Bush family was the Bin Laden family. So what is this? Saddam was created by the Americans and all the problems we have [were created by the Americans]. The Iranians would never have had what they have now had they not been helped by the Americans. They created their own monster and now are trying to find a way to deal with them and religion has found its way into [defining] the conflict [in the Middle East]. So I think it is more economic war than religious war.

Question by Dr. David Owusu-Ansah: What do you think [of this]. In Ghana, apart from the teachings of the Prophet that Islam must be peaceful, [can you think] of anything in particular about the culture and the people that also contributes to [peaceful co-existence]?

Response: Yes, in Ghana, the culture contributes a lot because we are very peaceful people. If you look at Africa, people are more interrelated. If you look at our Zongos [settlements usually defining the Muslim communities in the non-Muslim towns and villages], most of the people there are settlers and we have learned to live together and for that reason we respect each other. So our teaching is completely different and the people of these settlements did not know what politics was about [even to the extent that they will become involved violently in it].

Question/statement by Dr. Akyeampong: Now and then, we [hear of conflict]. Though there is religious tolerance, Church people and pastors act a little anxious [about] Muslims [and may even incite conflict].

Response: When I talk about Christianity [and therefore the history of mutual respect and tolerance] I am talking about the old Churches [such as the Catholics, Methodist, Anglicans, Presbyterian], but these [new] Charismatic Churches are more political than anybody else. You

see, the Roman Catholics and the Methodists and [the other old established Churches] their priests are very decent people and they don't even want money. They have devoted their life to teaching and that is what they were taught. But these Charismatic Churches, they are here to make money and some of them want to say that "I have the best voice [to preach] than you and therefore I can command people to listen to me" and they do certain things that are not even in the Bible. How can a priest stand up and say to people to "Put your hand at where it hurts and pray and say that the pain is gone?" They say these things on the Radio! Why don't they go to Korle Bu [Teaching Hospital] and cure all the sick people there if they have the power to heal? We are not stupid. But they [the Charismatic priests] have learned how to manipulate people's mind to listen to them so they say to them "Put your hands in your pocket" and the people do so, and they say "Bring the money out of your pocket" and the people do so too and this doesn't make them priests. Bishop Sarpong [of the Catholic Church in Kumasi] hardly talk in public except when he is at his Church, and so does Rev. Buckle. These are very close friends and you can say that they have devoted their time to this and these Charismatic priests don't. For example, a man [Charismatic Priest] can work to my office and tell me "Alhaji I am coming to pray for you." I don't think one has to come to pray for me. I believe that we are all close to God and he listens to all of us. No one is closer to God than you are. So if you are a believer, you can pray for yourself. As for those who go to those churches, these are people who do not have belief. I call them "Fire Service Christians". They wait till there in trouble and they run to God. God will never answer your prayers. So the charismatic priests are capitalizing on these people and some of [the people who run to the charismatic priests] have very dubious characters and when something happens to them then they want somebody to address it. Even our Prophet when somebody went to him and wanted something and the person forgot to say "Insha Allah" or "If God wished it" it took the person forty years to get his wish fulfilled. This is so because the Prophet does not have power to make wishes. God does. The same thing: Christ was saying to people that "I cannot save you, I am only teaching because even I am not clean." The same thing that the Prophet [Muhammad] tells us. So those who believe and understand the teaching will not go to anybody [to seek immediate answers]. We have them in our [Muslim] religions too. There are people who do not want to work. They call themselves soothsayers and they tell you that "tomorrow you mother will die but I will pray for her". We have them in the Christian religion and we have them in the Muslim religion too. But in every society you have bad ones and we know and we are teaching the people not to believe that. If you have something that worries you, pray about it. Pray and repent! Don't pray and go do it again. So when we believe that God has given us [things] but Satan has also asked God for powers. [Satan] wants to mislead people and he doesn't want to go to Heaven but he wants a lot of people to go to hell with him. But he [Satan] doesn't go [tempting] ordinary people. He goes to the rich, the learned and powerful people. When you go to pray, you should devote all your thoughts to the prayers and to God because you are asking for forgiveness. But while you are praying, the Satan will come and ask, "what about the money you have with Alhaji Banda, are you going to collect it?" The purpose is to distract you off God. So we know this that Satan is there to mislead us and these people [Charismatic priests and those like them] are there to mislead us so I don't see any religious friction because we live very peacefully in West Africa.

Question by Dr. Owusu-Ansah: I know you talked a little about the Mosque to Emmanuel. I do not know the story about the Mosque. I see it as a very beautiful mosque, an impressive structure. Why did you decide that you will build a Mosque as opposed to the Muslim community building [its own place of prayer]?

Response: Well, [I Have done this because of] the way I was brought up and the way I understand the religion, God said “build me a house in the world and I will build you one in Heaven.” We use our money to buy sins. Everybody is a sinner. It doesn’t matter who you are, even the priest or the Imam [Muslim leader] they all have sins one way or another. You don’t have to go kill before you become a sinner. Your eyes can cause you to sin, your ears can cause you to sin and everything you do can lead to sin. We use money to chase women, or drink, people use money to go and smoke, or take people’s wives away from them, so if you use your money and you use it properly and believe in God [then that is good]. That Mosque belongs to God, it does not belong to me. It is God’s house and everybody should pray over there. I really think that it provides an environment where people can pray in comfort and have peace of mind to do it. In fact, in every house I have, I have also built a Mosque inside and I learned this from my father.

Question by Dr. Akyeampong: So this is a public Mosque?

Response: I built it but it doesn’t belong to me. Everybody can go there to worship and I don’t have a special place to sit.

Question by Dr. Owusu-Ansah: But you have your own Imam?

Response: Yes, I pay them but I do not have a special place at the Mosque. If I come there and it is full, I pray outside the Mosque.

Question by Dr. Akyeampong: So when was it built?

Response: This Mosque was supposed to take me one year to build but it took me two years to complete. It is finished and we use it but I want to have an official opening it before this year’s Ramadan and after that I will establish a special committee to look after it. It was built in the year 2004.

Question by Dr. Owusu-Ansah: You said that your father taught you about these religious values. In our research on Asante history and the place of Muslims in it we came across the name of one Muhammad al-Banda 1818 to 1824 was one of the important Muslims in Kumasi. The Head Muslim was Muhammad al-Ghamba, but al-Banda was one of the favorite of Asantehene Osei Tutu Kwame and he sent him a lot on missions (distances in the Northern direction). Is there a relationship between your name and than al-Banda in Asante history?

Response: We, the indigenous Muslims in Ghana (and Asante) were the Banda people. We

fought for the Asantehene so that we can even be on the stool of Bantama Division of Kumasi. We are among the Asantehene's Asahene [war chiefs]. We fought in the Yaa Asantewaa War [of 1900 against the British] so even the *apakan* or palanquin used by the Bandahene [Banda chief] was given him by the Asantehene [King of Asante]. So we can inherit the Bantama Stool as you know that the Bantama stool serves as the Ministry of Defense of the Asante nation. That is the history of the Banda. We are not part of the Asante Nkramofo [the king's personal Muslim division of medicine men] but rather serve as part of the military division of Bantama.

Question/statement by Dr. Akyeampong: You mentioned that you were born in Kintampo.

Response: Yes, my parents migrated to Kintampo from Banda.

Question by Dr. Owusu-Ansah: Where will you situate Banda in relation to Northern Ghana and Kintampo if somebody doesn't know where Banda is?

Response: It is in the Bui area. My parents migrated from there to Kintampo to settle there. Kintampo is a unique little village with a unique history. It has two paramount chiefs that control it. Did you know that? So during the colonial days, Kintampo was like the Ombudsman's seat. The Nkoranza who settled there is the only people who did not fight for the land. They come from Amakom in Kumasi, and then there is the Mo-hene (Mo-king). The Nkoranza rulers (from Amakom) were chased out of Kumasi—hence Nkoranza means “the three old men”. They were chased from Kumasi for causing adultery. One settled at Nkoranza, the other at Kisima, and one migrated out to Mali so they all came from Amakom.

Statement by Dr. Akyeampong: One thing of interest about Nkoranza and Mo history is that when each one wants to claim the town, they have the Wangarahene steps in.

Response: No, the Fanyinama [chief of the Wangara] was appointed the Ombudsman by the colonial administration. At that time, the military recruitment center was at Kintampo and the [colonial administration did not want Nkoranza and Mo to fight so the Fanyinamahene who is also a settler from the area now part of Burkina Faso was made the Ombudsman. He was the headman of the Wangara community, so he was taken and made the Ombudsman.

Statement by Dr. Owusu-Ansah: That means that the idea of mediation and tranquility has been part of the tradition.

Response: Yes, the colonial government went to [chief Fanyinama] as opposed to using any other paramount chief to establish peace in the area and settle the market areas. [These towns and settlements are related and connected through trade and migration. In fact, you see this connectedness] the way we studied our geography classes when we were young: “Lawra [to] Kumasi—Mampong, Ejura, Kintampo, Atebubu, Yeji, Salaga and Tamale...” This was how we studied geography by making references to the administrative centers [but this was also linked to a historical connection that had developed].

Question by Dr. Akyeampong: The last time I came to visit you, you told me the story of your younger days [and how you grew up]; and you told me about your travels to Mali and other places. [Can you tell us about those days]?

Response: Yes, that was in the 1950s--in 1955, 1956, 1957.

Question/statement by Dr. Akyeampong: You were born at Kintampo, and in your youth you interacted with people from different ethnic backgrounds.

Response: Yes, I speak all the languages and my father was there. After 2nd World War, we moved to Kumasi where I was enrolled at the Government Boys' School [to start my education]. After that we [my family] started a little transport business. Then [my father] was also dealing in cattle and in those days, when your father told you to jump, you only asked how high. So he decided that I should learn the trade the hard way. So he sent me to Mali (which in those days was part of the French Soudan) and we were the Gold Coast but they all used the West African currency. He [my father] said that I should go to Mali to buy cattle (just like a shepherd and to trek with the [purchased] cattle from Mopti (in Mali) by foot to Kumasi (the central part of the Gold Coast now Ghana). It was a very exciting moment in my life.

Question by Dr. Akyeampong: Being a Muslim and having the ability to speak all those languages, how did it help you when you stepped outside of Ghana?

Response: It helped me a lot. When I went to Mali, the Wangara community helped me when I was there and I traveled in Burkina Faso and Niger and the languages and my Islamic religion was helpful. And when I went to London also the kind [of work I had done before was helpful] because I can take any manual job and do it without thinking that it was beneath me or difficult for. I think it was a good training even though we did not think [of it at the time when my father made me do all those difficult tasks]. In fact, at that time [when he gave me all the very difficult work, I thought my father hated me. I didn't believe he was doing anything good for me and now I am so grateful for that.

Question by Dr. Owusu-Ansah: Now you are a successful business person and a great contributor to the Muslim community. What is your background in Islamic education?

Response: I went to Islamic school before I went to secular school at Kintampo in 1939 and I was about 6 years old. That was the Makaranta (Quranic school).

Question by Dr. Owusu-Ansah: Did your father teach you the Quran?

Response: No, he gave me to somebody else. There was a Mallam (a Muslim teacher) who was conducting the school and my father gave me to him. But he was making sure that I was following the Islamic learning and conduct. I remember when I went to London and I was away

for some years. And he sent somebody to London to find out whether I was still practicing my Islam or whether I have taken up drinking and bad behavior. I had a flat in London and of course when you visit somebody you [wait] to be served water. This man came to my flat [apartment] and he went straight to my fridge and it did not click for me that he was checking whether I kept [alcoholic] drinks; and I said please let me serve you and he said no this is my home too but he did not find any alcohol and till now I cannot tell you the taste of alcohol yet I have all the opportunities to drink [and do other un-Islamic things]. In London, I was free and there was a time that I was a member of 21 night clubs but I never touched alcoholic drinks. It is the training given to me and I came to believe that God sees what I do and there is the fear and the belief.

Question by Dr. Owusu-Ansah: So did you attend the standard [normal] schools too?

Response: Yes, I started from Kintampo and finished in Kumasi.

Question by Dr. Owusu-Ansah: And what did you do after you finished your elementary education?

Response: I was working for my father. My father was a food contractor and I came to Accra here to attend secondary schooling and also work for my father. His business supplied the army [and other institutions] with food. My father's name was also Alhaji Banda. I worked with him but of course he did not pay me and I do not remember ever collecting salary from him. I ate from the house and if I am late and the food finished, that was it; and in the evening you have to rush home for dinner [before the food finished].

Question by Dr. Akyeampong: Was your father also in transport business?

Response: Yes, he was and I think that it is from where I got the interest in transport business. Earlier [in his career in the 1950s] he bought a bus, which plied between Mampong and Kumasi [in the Ashanti Region of Ghana].

Statement by Dr. Akyeampong: And today you have buses and

Response: Yes, I have "road" [buses], "sea" [tugboats/shipping business], and "air" [cargo and airlines].

Statement by Dr. Akyeampong: And everyone sees you as a very successful business person.

Response: Yes, that is what they say. But I am still trying to be successful. But I am very grateful because if I look [back to] where I have come from, then I think I have been blessed.

Question by Dr. Akyeampong: What do you think [a combination of factors] explains how far you have come—that is if somebody wants to emulate your achievements?

Response: Well, I think what made me what I am is that I believe in management and letting them [employees] be part of what I am doing. Let them have the opportunity to exercise their experiences and let them believe in what they are doing. I never say “I”; I always say “We” and we work together. The problem of my workers has always been my problem and their happiness to be my happiness. I want them to know that I want to know what is wrong with them and it is the biggest way for one to succeed and if you want to succeed let the people you take on know that you respect them and you care about them. And even when you interfere you should do so in a nice way and let them do their responsibilities. That is one of the things to do and let them feel vested in the work and let them know that they have worked well for the company.

Question by Dr. Akyeampong: From its beginning Islam and commerce were related and the Prophet himself was a trader and his wife Khadija was also a trader. This was also the case in West Africa where some even converted to Islam to gain access to trade. Then all these interests have their Muslim roots and made Muslims trading with Muslims easier. Does the religion of Islam continue to facilitate commerce and make the people who are trading more trustworthy and more transparent to work with?

Response: Yes, it used to and I am being very honest with you. But today some of the very non-trustworthy persons are Muslims. I have to be frank with you because even if you look at the political scene in this country anything destructive that needs the use of force to settle, they go to the Zongo [Muslim quarters] to get the people to do it for them. So those days are gone when [Islam and Muslims represented peace]. My grandfather never bought meat at the butchers’ market because he believed that the one that was slaughtered at his house was better. Today it is not there. We have Muslims who drink, we have Muslims who dupe people and in certain areas [in this country] people do not even want to hear the names of persons called “Alhaji” because they are among those who do these things. So I don’t think that [the old values of Islam that permeated the conduct of honest commerce] prevails any more and I think I treat people on their own merit.

Question by Dr. Owusu-Ansah: What do you think caused these changes to what you have just described?

Response: Maybe I have been exposed to people in the outside world. I can [evaluate or] tell you things about people and in 9 out of 10 cases I will be right. Some of these Muslims have given Islam a very bad name. I remember when we were young and some of the non-Muslim boys used to say that Muslim boys [did not think because we have become like the sheep skin on which we prayed, thus idea that Muslims are backward or not to be trusted also prevail]. Let me tell you a story: One day I was talking to a certain Head of State [that I am not going to name] and another Head of State called on him, and he said that I should go and see him. So the visiting Head of State commented when I greeted him, he said “Yes, I hear you are a Muslim but a good One.” So when I came back I asked what has been said of me, and he said that he only introduced me as a Muslim. It appeared that Muslims have duped this Head of State before so he was cautious of Muslims. Thus I will say that the Muslim character we had in the past are not necessarily the same that prevails. Even the time I was operating in Mali, people were very

honest. From Mopti to Ghana, we had five solid days that we slept in the bush [because there were no towns in the distance covered]. On our third day about 8 PM wild animals entered among our cattle and scattered the herd. Could you believe that wherever we went [among the villages along the way], people will say “oh your cattle came here yesterday,” and they will give them to us. Nobody cheated us that they haven’t seen our cattle. They gave them back even though it took three months to gather them but we had them back. This honesty was there, but today there is little honesty because times have changed and people want to be rich and the politics and the changes in the economy have made it in such a way that if you do not have money your own wife and children do not respect you. Today, I do not think that I can tell any of my children to go to Mopti to herd cattle home, but in those days I saw it as an honor for your father to tell you to do that.

Closing statement: We hope things will change for the best. Alhaji, we know that you are a busy man. We thank you for the time we have spent with you. Thank you.